

Theological Reflection – The Prayer I Didn’t Want to Pray

A yellow card, a prayer request, simple enough.

Just a name: Charlie Kirk.

At first, I paused, sort of nervously. “Hmmm...what do I do with this?” is the thought that ran through my mind. I did not want his name on one of the cards that would show up this morning. I had just had a conversation with another pastor the day before – “I won’t say his name”, she said. I’m sure the request was a sincere one from whomever wrote it. This is my first Sunday leading a prayer. What to do?

That moment cracked open a deeper theological struggle: what does it mean to pray for someone who I don’t agree with. It’s beyond that. His public theology and political rhetoric feels fundamentally opposed to the Gospel as I understand it, and against who I am and how I live my life. Do we name Charlie Kirk – a person, but a person who is symbol to me, to many in my life, and to many in the congregation, I am sure, of division, exclusion, and white Christian nationalism- in our prayers of the people?

What I chose was to simply pray for “Charlie”, that’s what we do, we simply say first names and nothing else was written on the card.

I know that we are called to love our enemies. I know Jesus taught us to pray for those who persecute us. In recovery we are taught that praying for someone we resent is a powerful tool for overcoming bitterness and finding emotional freedom. It’s not done to change the other person, but to change our own perspective and release ourselves from the harm of holding onto anger.

But does that mean giving voice, even in prayer, to someone who represents harm to me, to so many in my life, to so many in our congregation and to those they love, to our queer members, people of color, immigrants, the poor? Is it faithful to name him in our communal prayers, or does that inflict spiritual harm on those already marginalized?

I felt the tension, all in that moment. I’m not seasoned at this, I don’t know what to do, I thought. So, I said “Charlie”, we pray for “Charlie”.

In the quiet of the afternoon, deep in thought, the tension built in me and what was revealed is what I think is the very heart of what prayer is.

Prayer is not about agreement. It’s not endorsement. It’s communion. Communion with God, with each other, with all of creation. It’s where we hold the world’s tensions before the Divine, trusting that God can hold what we can not. Prayer is where we bring both love and lament, both gratitude and disgust, both hope and heartbreak.

I was being asked to bring “Charlie” into the presence of God, who is Love – pure, unconditional, incomprehensible Love. That’s not an act I take lightly.

I was tempted to skip over the card, refuse to acknowledge it. I had a desire to guard the space of our prayer, to protect it from intrusion by ideologies that bring harm and violence to this world. The Gospel, though, does not allow us to stay safe. Jesus didn’t pray only for the oppressed. He prayed for the oppressor, too. From the cross, he whispered forgiveness for those who didn’t even ask for it.

Prayer must be honest. Prayer shouldn’t be sanitized. What I wish I had said was, “We pray for Charlie Kirk”, not through gritted teeth or false, faked or forced neutrality. I wish I had been more honest and named the pain, the disagreement, the anger. I wish I had been quick enough, practiced enough, sure enough, willing enough to wrestle with God and my deep grief of polarization in that moment.

I wish I had said, “God, we lift up Charlie Kirk – not in agreement, but in hope that our hearts, whether we have been hurt by him or agree with him, might be transformed by your mercy. We pray for those harmed by his words, and we pray also for those who agree with his ideology, that all of our hearts may be turned toward justice, humility and love.”

This is not about centrism. It’s not about false equivalence. It’s about refusing to give up the radical call to love, that we are taught by Jesus, even when it’s excruciating. It’s about believing that God’s table is wide enough for everyone. It’s also about acknowledging that sitting at the table changes us. It must.

If prayer is anything, it’s where we practice resurrection, daring to believe that even what seems most broken in our society can be made new, including the hearts of those we struggle to name out loud. Including our own. Including mine. Amen.