

“Thoughts and Prayers” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
November 3, 2019, Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

The title of today’s message is ‘Thoughts and Prayers.’ What do you think of when you hear those words? Maybe you think of public figures who use this phrase after every major disaster – and wonder if they are really praying. Maybe you think the words are a copout. You are not alone. Just look at this cartoon mocking the phrase. There are many, many articles on the internet criticizing those who say, ‘our thoughts and prayers are with you.’ Those critics say, ‘stop talking and take action.’ Or -- just maybe, just maybe, you are like me and sincerely believe our thoughts and prayers do make a difference in this world. Just maybe you are praying for the victims of the latest mass shooting or natural disaster. Just maybe you mean it when you say, ‘you are in my thoughts and prayers.’ I hope so.

Spoiler alert. I’m not going to give a message on the dangers of assault rifles or advocate for gun control.

Are our thoughts and prayers really just an empty box like some people believe? Or is there substance to our thoughts and prayers? This issue has so captured the psychic of the USA that several organizations have done studies to determine if thoughts and prayers were of any value. The result: prayers are of value to Christ-followers. In other studies prayer has been found to calm those who pray and produce actual physical changes in their brain. (*The Atlantic*, October 6, 2017, The Case for 'Thoughts and Prayers'—Even If You Don't Believe in God)

Thoughts and prayers. Many years ago, perhaps about 2000 years ago, Paul was offering his thoughts and prayers to the Thessalonian Christ-followers. Paul makes clear to his readers that they are in his thoughts. He says that he and his companions **always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters . . . because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.** He goes on to say that he and his coworkers **boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.** Obviously, Paul has spent some time thinking about those to whom he addressed the letter. The Thessalonians were in Paul’s thoughts.

But Paul doesn’t just stop there with thoughts, he states: **To this end we always pray for you.** Then he gets specific about the content of his prayers. **that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Paul doesn’t just say you are in my thoughts and prayers. Paul spells out his thoughts and his prayers giving Paul’s words authenticity. There’s a ring of genuine sincerity in his words that reveal his feelings towards the Thessalonian believers. Paul provides an example for each of us on how to sincerely offer our thoughts and prayers.

Now before you dismiss the idea of thoughts and prayers as too simple, consider that thoughts are work. Thinking about a situation often pushes us to view what's happened not from our view, but the view of those directly affected and may lead us to consider if there are tangible actions we might do, or support others in doing, that will help.

In his book, *New Mercies I See*, Stan Purdum talks about being the pastor of a little country church where several of the members were dairy farmers.

One day, a child of one of those farmers died suddenly. So Purdum rushed to their home to offer what comfort he could. When he got there, he found the father and mother of the deceased child in the house, with their other children around them. He knew at that time of day, the father would normally have been in the barn, milking cows, a procedure that needs to be done without fail twice a day. But a family member told Purdum that two of the neighbors, farmers themselves, had come to handle the milking without being asked.

Their thoughts had been with the grieving family, and it led them to act.

Thoughts are work, yes, and so is prayer. When you pray for someone you're putting yourself in a place to see and understand their plight. Prayer does indeed deepen our empathy and puts us in a position where God can change us and lead us to some action we can take. And consider that those you are praying for may be so emotionally affected that they cannot pray for themselves. You are truly helping them when you pray for them.

In times of tragedy, whether it affects many or only a few, thoughts and prayers will never be the whole answer, but it's a great place to start!

Writing about the difficulties of life, author Anne Lamott said, "It's funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools — friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty — and said, 'Do the best you can with these, they will have to do.' And mostly, against all odds, they're enough."

God has also given us thoughts and prayers in that box of seemingly inadequate tools and told us to do our best with them. Thus, our thoughts and prayers, sincerely and genuinely offered and followed through on, are never for nothing.

Paul provides us an example of the importance of thoughts and prayers. When you say your thoughts and prayers are with a person or situation, carry through on your statement. Think about the situation, pray about the situation. You just may be moved to action. And that would be good.

May God bless your every effort.