

Necessary but Not Sufficient: Good Intentions and Healing the World

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The day I started putting this service together, I took a break to go shopping at Trader Joe's. The place was a madhouse and the parking was a challenge. As I found a spot, I noticed a young woman with no apparent disability pull into a handicapped spot, hustle out of her car and jog into the store. She didn't have a special license plate and she didn't reach down and put a hangtag on after parking. Perhaps needless to say, this pissed me off royally. What if someone with a real disability needed that spot? I went shopping and I stalked the woman a bit but didn't have enough courage to say anything. If you are thinking, my God, a crazy woman is preaching to me right now, you could be forgiven for that, and if you think you know the outcome of the story, you're probably right. The woman and I finished shopping at just about the same time and I wound up on line right near her accidentally on purpose. I finally screwed up my courage to speak truth to power, took a deep breath, leaned over and said, "You parked in a handicapped spot." She looked puzzled and said, "That's right." I said, "I didn't see your placard or hangtag." She said, "I leave my hangtag up all the time. I wouldn't do a thing like that!" At which point I realized that I had made a horrible assumption, namely that she didn't have a hangtag because she hadn't specifically put it up on her mirror after parking, like I do. As I got further along the checkout line I could see her car clearly, including – of course – the handicapped parking hangtag visible through the front windshield.

Why would I start a sermon about social justice, which is how we heal the world, with a story about failing so spectacularly? Because I think it gets us right into today's topic. Good intentions are a great thing but good intentions are not enough. Those of you familiar with the musical *Wicked* may remember that in the song "No Good Deed" Elphaba sings, "My road of good intentions led where such roads always lead." In other words, to hell. Hell may be a human invention, as I have claimed in one of my own songs, but the road there is still paved with good intentions. And yet, it's not that simple. The road to heaven must also be paved with good intentions or no one would ever walk on it and our chances of healing the world would diminish precipitously. And these days, as more and more people have the capacity to flourish stripped away from them politically, our world is in desperate need of healing.

So how do we get from the road to hell to the road to heaven? How do we get from our desire for a land where justice rolls down like waters and peace like an ever-flowing stream to the land itself? What is the alchemy that will transform us from asking "could I be the one to make the difference?" to demonstrating that "we are the ones who make the difference"?

I'd like to come at these questions from three related conceptual pairings today. We'll start with intentions and actions. Because today is the first day of Advent, we will then consider how the Jesus story might fit in. Thinking about Jesus means reflecting on faith and works, on the one hand, and hope and wisdom, on the other. If we cannot marry intentions to actions, faith to works, and hope to wisdom, we are likely to follow the road of good intentions right to that place we always say doesn't exist. So let's get started with the material that both the road to hell and the road to heaven are paved with: good intentions themselves.

When we think about good intentions we aren't doing so only as well-meaning individuals. Rather, we consider this idea, its limits and possibilities as a Unitarian Universalist community, one that lifts up its commitment to the well-being of all people and of the planet. This means that we need to approach today's topic with a mix of courage, care, and compassion. It is, I think, a knottier topic in real life than it may sound like in the abstract.

And so, after much reflection, I would like to propose a topic to think through in order to approach good intentions today: the phrase "thoughts and prayers" as this relates to mass shootings. I will not actually discuss gun violence itself, either its reality or any possible solutions, but will instead use the language of "thoughts and prayers" as an entry into a complicated topic.

We have seen it over and over again: someone who has no desire to make legal or cultural changes that would limit gun violence says that they are sending their thoughts and prayers to the victims of the latest shooting. And I have no doubt that they are. Thoughts and prayers in this context are very much like good intentions. Both can be comforting to those on the sending end as well as those on the receiving end. But thoughts and prayers, like good intentions, are necessary but not sufficient. They look backward at the most recent shooting but not forward toward the next.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that thoughts and prayers, as we currently hear them offered, are often a rhetorical move intended to sound good while avoiding any action that might have an impact. And this suspicion is exactly what helps us distinguish between good intentions that lead to hell and good intentions that lead to heaven: whether those intentions have a positive impact or not. The road to hell is paved with good intentions that have either no impact or a negative impact, while the road to heaven is paved with good intentions that have made the leap to valuable action.

Thoughts and prayers, after all, can lead to positive outcomes. In my own life, I have used thoughts and prayers to ready myself to apologize or otherwise mend a relationship with someone, to prepare for political activism, even as a prelude to playing at church. I routinely pray before I play that my hands might be a vessel for beauty, joy, hope and wonder. Sometimes it even works. And my use of loving-kindness meditation, a Buddhist prayer though Buddhists would not use the word prayer, has improved my relationships with various people over many years.

Given how fraught the issue of gun violence is, if I were a legislator or a person with cultural power to influence debates on the topic, I would be thinking and praying a lot: for the wisdom to come up with good ideas, for the emotional intelligence to relate to people with very different ideas, for the patience to engage the process with care, for the courage to speak my truth gently and kindly even if the truth about gun violence broke my heart every single day. And I have to believe that thoughts and prayers, used as spiritual preparation for right action, would take those free-floating good intentions and direct them toward a world with less violence. But the reason this could happen is precisely that I would follow the thoughts and prayers with strenuous work: researching the issue, coming up with ideas and working them through until I think they are both practical and compelling. Learning how to relate to people who see things differently and

practicing those relations in real time. Developing patience and courage through spiritual and emotional exercises and day-to-day experiences. Elphaba, from *Wicked*, is wrong to say that good intentions always lead to hell. Handled correctly, they can lead somewhere better. It's all in what we do with them.

Beyond intentions, the language of thoughts and prayers also relates to the idea of faith; we tend to think of prayer as a faith-based practice. And certainly, as the season of Advent starts today, we have reason to remember Jesus of Nazareth, whose ministry was deeply informed by faith. The stories of Jesus are peppered with moments of faith seen both in his teachings and his own life: claiming that everyone who asks would receive, falling asleep on a boat being tossed by rough waves, telling people not to worry about tomorrow for tomorrow would take care of itself, trusting in the one he called God all the way to a horrible death. Jesus at prayer in Gethsemane is one of the most iconic images of faith we have in the Christian tradition.

But as is written in the second letter of James, which we heard earlier, faith without works is dead. We don't know for sure who wrote this letter or even whether it was a single person or an authorial community, but we see in the text evidence of a prophetic concern with the oppressed. In fact, this document includes what might be the very earliest example of thoughts and prayers sent without the intent to act, which the letter roundly condemns. The relevant passage reads as follows: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace. Keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" The passage continues, familiarly: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith."

Jesus shows us plenty of faith but never uncoupled from works. As the stories have it, he heals those whose physical disorders have trapped them in the lowest part of the social order, freeing them to rejoin their communities, restoring them to physical and social life in gratitude and joy. He teaches with the intent of re-engaging the Hebrew tradition from which he comes, sharpening its spirituality, re-imagining some of its ethics, and situating it politically in his own, politically fraught time. And he invites everyone to his open table for food and drink, a scandalous thing to do in a society where one ate exclusively with people of the same social status. To welcome everyone regardless of rank, gender, ethnicity, religion, and occupation was an astonishing act of radical hospitality that, sadly, we don't see much of in our own world today. It's hard to read the Jesus stories as anything other than a confirmation that his faith drove his works and his works invited the people he encountered to share his faith.

In fact, though Jesus did not exactly say anything about thoughts and prayers, he offered a parable about works that I find instructive. The nations are gathered around a figure presumed to be the returned Jesus, who separates them into the blessed and the cursed. Now I am way too much of a Universalist to believe that any individual is actually cursed let alone any nation, but consider why the blessed nations are blessed in the parable. Jesus was hungry and they gave him food, thirsty and they gave him something to drink, a stranger and they welcomed him, naked and they gave him clothing, sick and they took care of him, in prison and they visited him.

The righteous nations are of course confused about this assessment since they don't recall doing any such thing. Jesus clarifies: "...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members

of my family, you did it to me.” Who belongs to the family of Jesus? In this parable, everyone. There is a spark of the holy in all people, and those who honor this spark and enable all people, especially the hard-up, to flourish, have shown by their works that they are righteous. And keep in mind that the parable is about nations, not individuals. The letter of James, discussed earlier, seems to be about individuals. But Jesus is holding entire nations accountable here; it is nations who are sheep or goats. Today, we might refer to countries. Do we as a country feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and tend the sick? Do we restore electricity and water treatment plants in Puerto Rico as quickly as possible? Do we provide resources to educate everyone, poor and wealthy, black and white, equally well? Or do we send thoughts and prayers while letting some people suffer and perhaps even exacerbating their suffering? The nations in the parable that did not tend the least among them didn’t see Jesus in their own poor and so saw no reason to take care of them. I bet they had great intentions, but in this parable at least, intentions didn’t cut it.

There is, of course, another aspect to Advent that leads us to our third pair of terms. Advent is normally less a time to reflect on the life and work of Jesus than a time to prepare for his arrival. And so it is widely understood as a period of hope and of disciplined waiting. Early Christians identified Advent with the season that leads to the Winter Solstice and further identified the birth of Jesus with the moment when the sky’s darkness begins its return to light. Christians were not alone in marking this season with festivals of lights; many other religions do as well. But today, by focusing on Advent in particular, we come to our monthly theme of hope. Hope, in and of itself, can have deep meaning; at the same time it can benefit when it is coupled with wisdom.

In a way, it is not fair to compare hope to good intentions. We don’t talk about the road to hell being paved with hope; in fact, absent hope, we may be tempted to despair and drawn to inaction in a time that desperately calls for our action. Today, when it feels like midnight but is actually five-fifteen in the afternoon, it is not obvious that it will start getting lighter earlier in less than a month. We know this intellectually but may not feel it in our bones. A good dose of hope can be helpful in these moments. We hope for the return of the light and the return of warmth. And when hatred and thoughtlessness, fear, greed and cruelty figure so prominently in our FaceBook feeds and our newspapers, we struggle to maintain hope that, as Unitarian Theodore Parker once said, the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. We need hope. Yet hope, though necessary, is also not sufficient.

If good intentions without action can lead to hell and faith without works can lead to the suffering of the poor, hope without wisdom can lead to passivity. Hope alone may instruct us to wait. Wait with faith and trust, with thoughts and prayers, and you will see good things happen. Wait for a savior who will fix all that is broken. Wait for political leaders who will make everything better. And if all we do is wait, we may find that all that is broken is not getting mended and that all that is bad is not getting better. Waiting has its value, but also its limits.

Fortunately, we have the option of rejecting passivity. We can wait for the light to be reborn in the darkness or we can bring the light ourselves, in our hands and our hearts and our minds and our souls. We can hope for an external savior or we can embody hope as Jesus did, knowing that the holy has no hands but ours. We can trust that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice or we can bend the arc toward justice ourselves. To do these things does in fact require

hope: hope that we can make a difference, hope that the world is not too far gone, hope that enough other people also want to be the ones to make the difference. But we need wisdom to leaven our hope: understanding that we absolutely must act ourselves, discernment about how to be of use as Marge Piercy puts it, insights that will enable us to be effective political and cultural agents while remaining in right relationship with those whose values we oppose.

And here, I am tempted to return to my opening story. That day in Trader Joe's, I had good intentions and took action on them but it didn't amount to anything useful. I had faith in my righteousness and in my ability to make a difference, and yet if I made any difference at all it was a bad one. I had hope that I could participate in an action, however small, that would be on the side of good. What I was missing that day was wisdom: the pause to collect accurate information, the humility to recognize that someone else could be doing something a way I might not do it and yet still be doing it right, the ability to try empathizing first rather than judging. I know that the wisdom to engage well with my political opponents eludes me often; perhaps it eludes many of us. It certainly seems to be eluding the country on a large scale right now. Maybe I am not the only person who would benefit from building more insight into my actions and more wisdom into my works.

Good intentions, faith, and hope can pave the road to heaven, but they alone are not enough to guarantee that the road goes there. If we by our actions walk down that road, if we by our works invite all to join us on the road, and if we by our wisdom smooth and broaden the road so that everyone has access to it, we might just get close enough to heaven to see the world for which we yearn. May it be so. Amen.