

God the cheerleader

Prayer can feel like wasted time because of our culture of busyness. Even more, we may not expect God to do much.

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I saw a Facebook post the other day suggesting that many Christians suffer from functional atheism. By this the writer meant that our professed beliefs don't translate into any concrete trust that God's power is somehow with those who follow Jesus. Rather we imagine that nothing can happen unless we do it. I think this problem is pronounced among pastors. I know it afflicts me.

One reason that some pastors don't pray as often as you might expect: prayer isn't seen as productive. It doesn't actually accomplish anything visible. I suspect that many congregations would be uncomfortable with a pastor who announced, "I will be secluded in prayer for a few hours every afternoon." But pastors' own notions of what is productive may have more to do with infrequent prayer. When there is a lot to get done, it can feel like wasting time.

It feels like wasted time because we're shaped by a culture that values production, efficiency, and busyness. But on a deeper faith level, this feeling emerges from a suspicion that God can't really be counted on. Yes, the Bible has stories about the Holy Spirit empowering followers to do amazing things on Christ's behalf, but how likely is that?

It is not as popular as it once was, but I've often heard the stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes explained as miracles of sharing. John's Gospel speaks of signs rather than miracles, and he tells of Jesus feeding 5,000 in a manner that does not lend itself to sharing interpretations. Not only are there twelve baskets of leftovers, but the crowd witnessing it is ready to crown Jesus king because of this momentous event.

It's a little hard to imagine that the crowd acts as they do because Jesus convinced them to share the lunches they had hidden under the cloaks, argued persuasively that there was enough for all if everyone pitched in. This, however, has not stopped preachers and scholars from suggesting that this is exactly what happened. There was always enough food, but people worried they'd be mobbed by the unprepared folks in the crowd if they revealed the lunch tucked in their pockets.

I suppose it would be no small feat convincing folks to share when they're worried that revealing their meager provisions could turn the crowd into a hungry mob. Still, if that's the best Jesus can do—if all God has is a convincing argument—well no wonder people don't expect God to do much of anything.

For those of us who feel called to be the church, to be the body of Christ in the world, surely we must expect more from God than a little cheerleading from the sidelines. I've never been clear on just how the mix of human agency and divine power works, but very often I've acted as though it all falls to the human side. If the pastor isn't good enough, if the youth leader isn't good enough, if the lay leaders are committed enough, and on and on, then nothing much is going to happen.

The humans look like the only gods in this sort of story. Perhaps we will scrounge up enough to give everyone a taste, but it's hard to imagine everyone full and 12 overflowing baskets remaining.

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