

Mourning prayer

The church's old cork board reminded me that our heartbroken cries go directly to God.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Martha Park)

No one seems to want to talk about the pandemic. It's like that period your parents spent living apart, which they never told you about and seldom spoke to each other about. It might have been an important and creative and learning season, but we've entered a conspiracy of silence and filed it under "too painful."

One thing my congregation started doing during COVID was to livestream worship. At one point it seemed we were livestreaming everything, and no part of our lives or homes was sacred. But when things settled down and we stopped doing bread making or yoga classes from the kitchen or bedroom, one thing that survived was daily online morning prayer. Prior to the pandemic, a handful of people gathered in the sanctuary. Now those people are joined by about 100 others online, and more watch later in the day.

One element that draws a large response each morning is the opportunity to post a petition in the comments section, assured that the person assisting at the service will read it out. Then the person leading offers extempore prayers inspired by the set psalms and readings, recalling those going through a relationship breakdown at work or at home when the passage is about Saul and David, or about the feeling of being the one not chosen when Acts tells us that Matthias made the cut while Justus missed out.

There's quite a bit of traffic in the chat that's social rather than devotional. And few contributors dwell on the details of their petitions; most offer simply a list of names, and the majority of concerns are of a medical nature. The person leading attempts to plumb the depth of global crises; by contrast, the offerings from the livestream congregation tend to be uncomplicated.

But it's still a lot more elaborate than what went before it and continues still: the prayer board. This sits near the entrance, by the candle stand. It has green burlap over a cork backing, scraps of paper repurposed from old bulletins, and thumbtacks; no doubt it has been this way since the first century. Yet one morning, as the person assisting handed me the stack of prayers posted overnight—including "I'll be out begging tonight, Lord. Keep me safe" and "I miss my husband. I don't know how I'm going to live without him"—my eyes landed on a scrap of paper whose prayer bolted through me like electric current: "For the baby I aborted: I love you despite never meeting you. I hope you're with me until I have the chance to explain why the timing wasn't right in person. Until then, I must let go. xxx"

I choked. I don't know if I've ever read a more heartfelt or heartbreaking prayer. I was humbled, moved, brought to my knees. Morning prayer had become mourning prayer. This child of God was wrestling with powerful feelings, memories, wonderings, and she had brought all this into the divine presence. She had asked those of us gathered to place these poignant realities on the altar of God's grace and mercy. And, embraced by the miracle of God's story, she was pleading with the Holy Spirit to make something good of it all—maybe not straightaway or even soon: but in God's good time.

My colleague noted my silence and asked what was up, so I handed her the prayer. "Reminds me why we do what we do," she said. I had no words. I've kept that prayer close to me ever since. I have it beside me as I write this.

It's a human impulse to create hierarchies. Does attendance in the building have more validity than participation online? Do the petitions of those who regularly engage with morning prayer count for more upstairs than the lament of a person who wanders into a church in the center of a global city, pouring out love yet pleading for understanding and mercy from God and from the child she never carried to term? The gospels are replete with testimony, from the story of the widow's mite to the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, that suggests that while the prayers of the faithful are gathered up by the Holy Spirit, offered to the Son, and spoken by the Son into the ear of the Father, a cry like the one of the woman who never met her baby goes on the express line, direct to the Father's heart. Ministry is about modeling those transformed hierarchies.

It turns out morning prayer isn't the curious intersection of time-honored psalms and readings with the technological possibility of petitions in the chat. It's the constellation of all kinds and manner of people, gathered round in the company of the Trinity, bringing wonder, doubt, anxiety, disappointment, fear, regret, hope, and despair. As I clumsily handle the iPhone, so participants offer their good wishes to one another, their observations on the world, and their pleas and concerns to God; as I strive to summon up the poignancy of the scriptures in prayers of compassion and insight, so participants endeavor to set their minds on the things above. And somewhere among us, in creeps a person with a broken heart, longing for wholeness, acceptance, and embrace. In that moment the whole gospel comes true: our stories are fragile, flawed, incomplete. God fulfills and heals and holds our stories—and makes them beautiful, hopeful, and eternal. Death becomes life, sadness becomes hope, grief turns to wisdom and grace. Love is all.

While packing up the technology and blowing out the candles, I have only one question—one that digs into my soul. That woman who came into a church looking for wholeness, acceptance, embrace, and hope—had she come to the right place? My daily vocation is simple: to ensure the answer is yes.