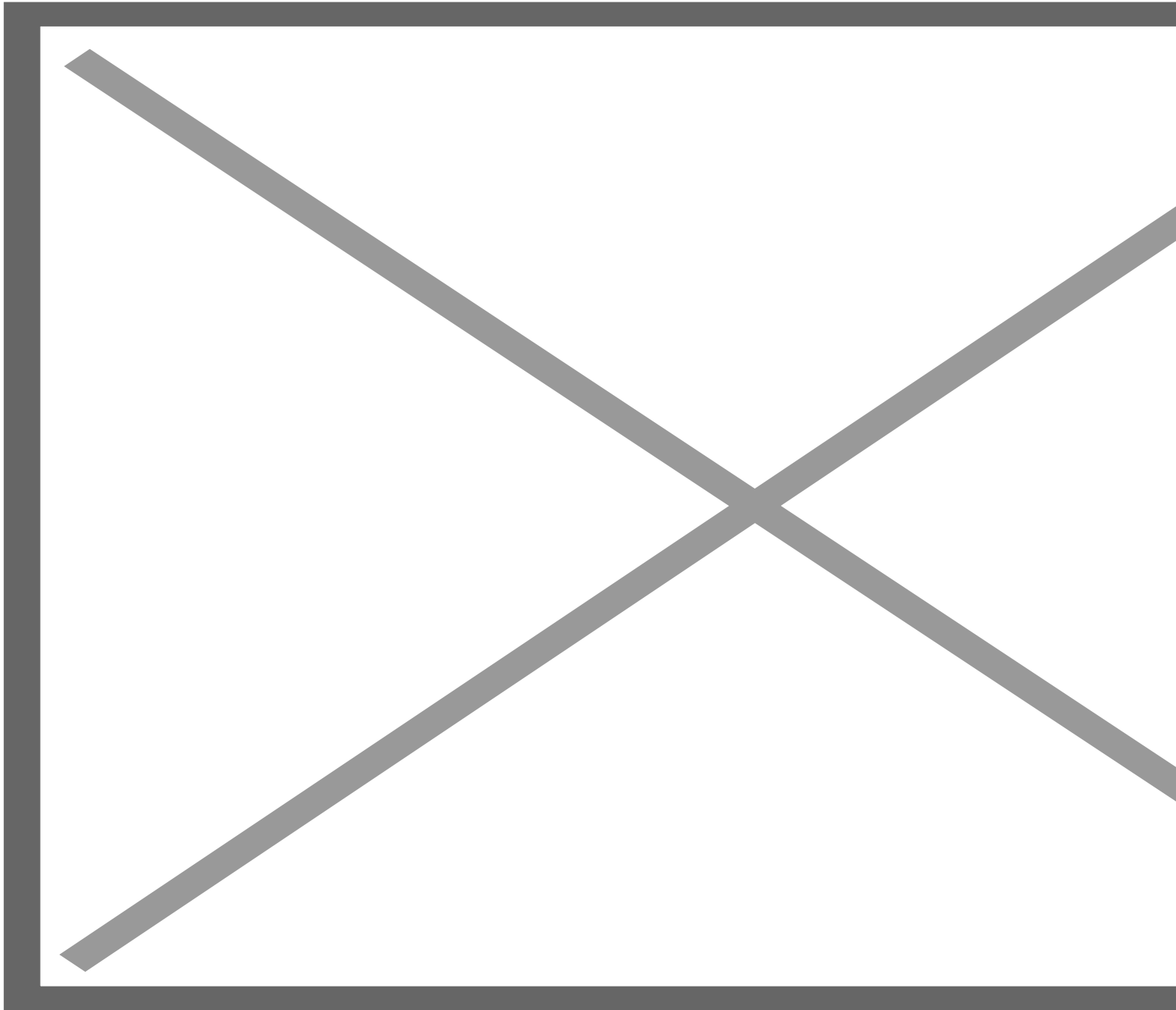


Pentecostalism for the people

Progressive politics can flow naturally from a life of prayer. I learned this from my Latine Pentecostal family.

by [Colton Bernasol](#)

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty & Creative Commons)

I am surrounded by prayers. Not my prayers, really. My mom's and grandma's prayers. As Pentecostals, they constantly pray. For family, for keeping me safe at protests, for help and for hope, for grace, for their friends, for the sick, for love, for change.

From their constant prayer, I learned that prayer is ritual. Often it is an invocation of the not-yet or the not-immediately-present. It is otherworldly. Because of this, it is often ridiculed by the activist left for being insufficiently political and too easily abused. I can understand why. Amid devastating catastrophes, calls for "thoughts and prayers" are dismissed as inauthentic if left unaccompanied by immediate action. Prayer is assumed to encourage political passivity and moral indifference.

Meanwhile, those on the reactionary right recognize the deeply political dimensions of their faith and consecrate their wars, imperial ambitions, and nationalist fantasies with prayer. How can one pray when public prayer amounts to nothing more than disturbing, meme-like images of J. D. Vance or Pete Hegseth praying for God to bless their vicious deployment of imperial violence?

Prayer is either not political enough, or it is too political in the wrong ways.

When I discovered theologians in the tradition of liberation theology and the writings of revolutionaries such as Karl Marx and Franz Fanon, I found myself at odds with the Pentecostalism of my family. Why pray when one should act? Is prayer nothing more than "false consciousness," a spiritual projection to escape the estrangements of unbearable labor exploitation, irreparable racial violence, and unstoppable US militarism abroad? In turning to the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial traditions in my late teens and early twenties, I began to pray less. Prayer, I believed, does not bring change to the world. And, as Marx so unapologetically puts it, the point is change. Prayer, then, was anti-revolutionary.

But if we cede prayer to this reductive discourse, we cede what is an essential dimension of the life of Christian faith. We cede the progressive politics that can flow naturally from a life of prayer.

I learned this despite myself.

When I lived with my mom, she was always up at 5 am, preparing the house for the daycare she ran. I recall rising from sleep, the neighborhood covered in shadow, the whispers of atmospheric contemporary Christian music beyond my bedroom door. I'd rub my eyes, hear her faint amens, open the door, and peer down to the living room to see her with her arms raised, her whole being in praise to the Lord God. Her supplications turned the living room into a sanctuary.

In my earliest memories, I recall sitting with my mom at lunch to sing a song from the 1954 animated Disney film *Johnny Appleseed*. I'm embarrassed that this is one of my first memorized prayers, though less embarrassed by the song's deep gratitude: "Oh, the lord is good to me, and so I thank the lord," mom would sing to me. "For giving me / the things I need / the sun and the rain and the apple seeds / The lord is good to me—Amen." This is religious life in consumer North America; we make meaning from such commodities, bending them to serve life. Upon the prayer's end, we raised our heads and unclasped our hands. If my grandma came over, we were likely giving thanks for homemade tortillas, eggs, perhaps beans and chorizo.

I did not know then what I know today. My grandparents were migrant farmers from *la frontera*, the borderlands of Texas and Mexico. They travelled to places such as California and Missouri for temporary work, subject to provisional and exiled life at the edge of industrial agriculture in North America. Despite being American citizens, they were part of America's agricultural underclass. Had they farmed during the pandemic, they would have continued to work while most others stayed home. Had they farmed today, they might be profiled as the

reactionary right's quintessential enemy—the threatening Latiné foreigner, the doom of White American life.

My grandfather passed away from a heart attack before I was born, so I know him through the stories of my family. *Your grandpa was an orphan*, mom told me. He was tossed around to different family members living in Texas. I think this wandering and abandonment—this sense of exile—stayed with him. She remembers grandpa inviting strangers into the house and letting them stay the night. He'd give them a place to stay and food from his garden. *His garden wasn't big so that he could hoard it for the family*, mom said, *but so he could share*. When I asked her why grandpa was like this, she said he must have identified with lonely strangers who had nowhere to go.

Grandpa was always grateful to God, she tells me. *Gracias a Dios* is the Spanish phrase she remembers hearing most from him. Gracias a Dios for food. Gracias a Dios for warm winter clothes. He was grateful to God for the practical things of everyday life, what you need to have to survive as a wanderer. Though I don't know what his voice sounds like, I like to imagine him saying *gracias a Dios* as a kind of prayer forged in exile.

Gracias a Dios for the strangers.
Gracias a Dios for the garden.
Gracias a Dios for a place to sleep.
Gracias a Dios for my children.
Gracias a Dios for my grandchildren.
Gracias a Dios for the sky.
Gracias a Dios for the earth.
Gracias a Dios for love.
Gracias a Dios for life.

Perhaps my playful speculation takes his theology of prayer farther than he would go, but in his thanksgiving, I can see the counter-hegemonic insistence of my grandfather's life in prayer. He recognized life as a gift for everybody. Prayer attuned him to the vulnerability of others and opened him to hope. Far from being otherworldly, prayer turned him back to the ground. His communitarian openness to strangers emerged, I think, from his theology of grace. Life is a gift. *Gracias a Dios*. The only correct response is to share it.

Even though I have tried to define myself against Pentecostalism for much of my adult life, I have always been attracted to the fierce gratitude at the center of my family's life of prayer and how it opened them to the world. Religious, moral, and spiritual meaning were woven deeply into their lives. To run from the ways of God was to risk self-estrangement, estrangement from the divine, and estrangement from others. All of life, from birth to death, was seen as one long and constant communion with the presence of the Lord.

At a recent action in front of the Philippine consulate calling for the release of a recently detained Filipina migrant, the Episcopalian priest and [theologian of struggle](#) Primo Racimo declared that raising one's fists and stomping one's feet is as much prayer as the prayer often hidden away from public places. I stood behind him, holding up a banner in support of our detained *kababayan*, encouraged by his insistence on the organic connection between prayer and protest. Both prayer and protest make the present accountable to the political and ethical claim of God's future. By identifying our protest as prayer, Fr. Racimo brought prayer to the ground, insisting, I think, on the revolutionary and grassroots nature of the shared future of God. If God is life and God promises life to everybody, then prayer to God must be accompanied by a politics of life for others. For grandpa, this meant an ethics of giving, even to strangers; for Fr. Racimo and me, this meant protesting for the end of prolonged, unjust detention and deportation.

This is why I am trying to reclaim prayer and Pentecostalism. Or really, I am coming to terms with the fact that I have never really abandoned them. My family's prayers of gratitude helped me to understand the presence of God in daily life, marginalized life, rootless and exiled life. My own life. My grandpa's theology of grace insisted that life was a gift given to all. Nobody has a right to suffocate it. It belongs to the detained just as it belongs to the free. It belongs to the undocumented and the documented. The Spirit of God is Freedom, and when we pray—in our homes in the quiet darkness of early morning or in public at a protest—we are asking for God's Spirit to unleash this freedom unto the world.

The *Century's* community engagement editor Jon Mathieu talks with Colton Bernasol about the ways his family and his activism have caused him to revisit Pentecostalism and prayer.

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