

Transfiguration
Dallas, TX

Amos 8:4-7

Psalm 79:1-9

1Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

One of the privileges of my role as rector is that people seek me out for advice on books. They may be looking for something to help navigate a particularly difficult time in their life, or to engage with God in a new way, or simply to learn something new. I love these conversations, and I love helping people find a book. But the truth is that I am extremely likely to recommend one particular book to you, regardless of your situation: *The Book of Joy*. It captures a weeklong conversation between Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama about the nature of joy and how to cultivate it regardless of our circumstances. I really can't recommend it highly enough. The wisdom of these two sages radiates off the pages, and my mind often comes back to their words when I'm really searching for a guidepost.

Which may explain why a certain passage from it came to my mind this week, as I was reflecting on our readings for this morning. It's a story the Dalai Lama tells about a fellow Tibetan monk. After the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, the Dalai Lama went into exile in India, but this monk was not able to escape. Instead, he was imprisoned in a forced-labor camp for nearly 20 years, where he endured almost unimaginable deprivation and torture. He was eventually freed, and when he reunited with the Dalai Lama, he told him the way that he had been in great danger during all those years of torment. "I thought, of course, he was talking about dangers to his life," the Dalai Lama recounted. "He told me he was in danger of losing...*his compassion for his Chinese guards.*"

I am positively dumbfounded by this story. It challenges and inspires me every time I read it. And the reason I believe it's been at the front of my mind this week is that it has a lot to do with the bit of Paul's first letter to Timothy that we heard this morning (2:1-2). Paul writes, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."

Given how highly partisan our society is, I have to imagine that nearly all of us have struggled at times to pray for "all who are in high positions." I know some of us are struggling with this during our current presidential administration, and I also know that some of us struggled with it during the previous one. It's the result of the tragically commonplace reality that for most Christians, our politics affects our prayer life, rather than the other way around. And the reason for the struggle, I believe, has to do with our understanding of what it means to pray for someone. Prayer is commonly thought to be a sort of transaction between us and God. We submit our prayer, and we extract something from God. And we are most often willing to engage in that transactional

prayer on behalf of someone we care about or admire – someone whose wellbeing and success we desire, someone we're rooting for. We pray for them, because we want good things for them, and so we ask God to bless and care for them. Our parents or children. Our friend with cancer. Natural disaster victims. Maybe even a leader we really respect and support.

But what happens when we don't care about or admire a particular leader? What happens when we believe their leadership is harmful to people we love or advances policies we think are terrible? Well, then our typical frame for praying makes the idea of praying for them feel impossible. We don't actually desire their success, right, so we don't want to pray for them. Or else, we might pray for them, but it's something like, "God, please change this person and show them how wrong they are." "God, help this person finally make good decisions." Which may be *honest*, but it is also *problematic*. The prayer is almost more about reaffirming our rightness than it is *for* the other person.

But there's another way to understand our prayer lives, particularly when we pray for leaders with whom we may bitterly disagree – and this brings me back to that Tibetan monk and the danger he believed he was in during his long years in prison. Rather than seeing prayer as a transaction – something we do to extract things from God – what if we understood that *praying for others is how we maintain our compassion for them*? That is, what if prayer is less about what it accomplishes in others than about what God does through it within us?

Because the work of prayer is not about convincing God to see injustice or evil. And Jesus is clear in teaching that when we pray, it's not our job to point out the wrongs of others to God. God doesn't need our help knowing what's wrong with anyone else. Instead, when we pray for others – including leaders that our partisan echo-chambers have taught us to hate – it is mostly about enhancing our compassion for them. Friends, praying for someone does not mean you like what they do. But when we choose to follow Jesus, it comes with the requirement that we pray with love even for those who seem like our "enemies" – that we pray for God's compassion for them, and pray that we would never lose our compassion for them, either.

This is about more than just who we will pray for. This is about what we will choose to be vessels of in our lives. Will we be vessels of compassion and grace, or will we be vessels of gratuitous exchange? That's ultimately the question the manager had to answer in the strange parable Jesus tells this morning. And it's a strange one, isn't it? Biblical commentators are all over the map on it, so if you finished listening to it this morning and wondered to yourself, what in the heck was that all about, well, you're in good company. So, I'm not going to tell you what the parable is "about," because I don't precisely know. But I do know that something profound happens in the life of that manager, something that moves him from living and behaving in a way that earned him suspicion and disapproval to a way of living and behaving that earned him the praise

and commendation of Jesus. His life had been a vessel of transaction, of direct exchange, of getting what was coming to him and not worrying about anyone else, and it became a vessel of grace, of considering the needs of others and writing down debts.

He is now a steward of his master's grace. His impulse is conflicted, but it's good stewardship. Not of the money, but of his master's generosity and grace. By allowing himself to administer his master's generosity and grace, he benefits. Because when we allow ourselves to be conduits of God's generosity and grace, we receive grace in return. We become conduits of it, which means grace is passing through us all the time. When we allow something that powerful to flow through us, we can't help but be shaped by it.

The Tibetan monk was a vessel of grace and compassion. That is what his life was intended to release into the world, so he directed all his energy to maintaining that