

Letting the Lament Over the Coronavirus Result in Positive Action

My Dear Friends,

Everywhere we look today there are hurting people. More than 22,000,000 Americans are now trying to get unemployment insurance. The number of people in the U.S. who are infected with the coronavirus now number into the hundreds of thousands until it is quickly approaching the 1 million mark.

N.T. Wright in a recent issue of Time Magazine wrote, *“No doubt some will tell us why God is doing this. A punishment? A warning? Perhaps the biblical tradition we really need to turn to is lament. Lament is what happens when people ask, “Why?” and don’t get an answer. It’s where we get to when we move beyond our self-centered worry about our failings and look at the suffering of the world.”*

“In the Bible, God also laments. The Spirit groans. Jesus weeps. God grieves for his world. It is no part of the Christian vocation to be able to explain what’s happening and why. In fact, it is part of the vocation not to be able to explain – and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding and new hope.”

Why are we as people of God not able to hear the cries of those suffering from the coronavirus, the homeless and unemployed? Because we cannot hear such cries we are not able to pray with power and be the activists God has called us to be. Paul declared, *“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth”* (Romans 8:22).

As we study the Scriptures we will see that the Biblical landscape is filled with the cries of the afflicted and the lamentations of the suffering. The Scriptural witness contains loud and sustained outbursts in behalf of the least of these. *“The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish”* (Is.24:4). *“In his arrogance the wicked hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. He boasts of the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord. In his pride the wicked does not seek him in all his thoughts there is no room for God. He lies in wait like a lion in cover; he lies in wait to catch the helpless; he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net. His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength”* (Ps.10:2-4, 9,10).

These include the victimized children, many who are homeless or residing in homes with no utilities, senior citizens who are alone in the nursing homes with no visitors and only fears of becoming infected with the virus. Then there are the incarcerated without adequate legal defense who feel they are given a death penalty as they are locked up with those who have the virus. The witness of their needs should awaken us to the questionable things in society we have come to terms with.

The question is what happens to a society, a church, or an individual for whom the cries of the suffering are excluded? What happens to all of us when we let the cries be silenced and ignored in the prisons, on the streets, in the psychiatric wards, old age centers, or among the homeless.

The voices of the suffering and the groans of creation raise questions concerning issues that as believers, we must come to terms with. These questions include, why is it that such large numbers of the corona virus victims are members of the African American community who cannot get adequate health care?

Without the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation our communal worship largely consists of praise and thanksgiving. We feel uncomfortable with the groaning of creation and the cries of the oppressed. Such lamentations tell us everything is not all right and we must exercise faith to address injustices. The absence of lament in worship eliminates the questions of justice about the things we call blessings which frequently comes at the cost of great suffering for others. As a results God declares, *“When you come to appear before me who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts. Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to Me”* (Isa. 1:12,13). *“Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never—failing stream”* (Amos 5:23, 24).

It was Jesus who said, “as often as you have done it into the least of these even so you have done it unto Me.” Have we forgotten that the Christian memorial meal “The Lord’s Supper” comes out of the suffering of one who was executed as an innocent man? This sacrament should cause its participants to reach out through the love of Christ to those who are grieving and cast aside. It should cause us to respond to the world’s suffering and injustice in the midst of this pandemic.

To attend to the cries of those suffering from the corona virus will open us up to transformation and awaken us to the possibility of the embodiment of the Kingdom of God. It is these cries that awaken us to the suffering which also awaken us to the Savior who declared, *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4:18, 19). To receive Jesus as Lord and Savior is to receive His calling to wake up to the needs of the hurting and take direct action in His name in behalf of those who are suffering.

This direct action involves the call to awaken “the King” (those in authority) that Scriptures says, if he or she is truly doing the job as Scripture demands, *“He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy: he will crush the oppressor”* (Ps.72:4).

How we must hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation to the extent we will engage in deep prayer that those in authority “will come to the knowledge of the truth” and stop basing their decisions upon the advice of lobbyists and rich political donors. When Paul was urging us to pray for those in authority it was not a request to bless their acts of injustice but a request for prayer that they might be saved. He states, *“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—and Kings and those in authority, that we might live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men (and women) to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth”* (1 Tim 2:1-4).

Before we can expect the politicians to be delivered from indifference to the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation those who claim to be the people of God must first repent of their indifference. God has declared, *“If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land”* (2 Chron.7:14).

Your prayers in behalf of the poor, the fatherless, the widowed, the sick, hurting and homeless are, as George Herbert calls them, reversed thunder. *“Prayer is...reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear, the six-days world transposing in an hour”* (Psalm 29:3), shares the heavenly powerful response to prayer. *“The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; The God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters”*.

When believers pray, thunder resounds in heaven itself! Revelation 8:4-5 illustrates this fact. *“The smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on earth; and there were pearls of thunder, voices, flashes of lighting, and an earthquake.”* This scene reverses what usually happens with heaven making decisions that are acted out on earth. The prayer warriors referred to as the saints have intervened. The uninterrupted flow of events has ceased. The unexpected has become suddenly possible because prayer warriors like you have prayed in faith. Two or three have agreed together. *“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them.”* (Matt.18:19, 20)

History belongs to the prayer warriors who believe, agree and stand on the promises of God. They are the people who persevere for justice in spite of the obstacles and the odds. They know what is right according to Scripture and, as a result, will engage in prayer that brings forth actions of hope and help.

Prayer warriors know that prayer is never a private act. It is not vocalized worry. True prayer comes from the heart where a victory has resulted from an interior battlefield in which Christ now reigns supreme. In such a life, inner liberty results where the prayer warrior is free to act in obedience to God’s Word and not the expectations of others. The status quo is rendered obsolete and the obedience to Christ reigns supreme.

If Jesus is not Lord, then all activity and activism only further enslaves us to the god of self. As a result, we will simply be caught up in self-centered passions and fail to discover the possibilities of believing prayer. Without a life immersed in prayer, our social activism and acts of charity will only result in self-justifying good works. Unless the rivers of living water, resulting from a relationship with the Divine, perpetuated by prayer without ceasing, unfold, the wells of love in our lives will run dry. As a result, we will take on the likeness of the beasts of self-centeredness that are destroying the wonders of God’s creation.

Prayer in the life of the prayer warrior becomes the theater where one experiences the healing needed as he or she battles the principalities and power of this world.

True prayer is not just talking to God with our mouths, but it also involves the use of our ears and central nervous systems to hear and experience what God is desiring to say to us at this time and place. God created us to live in an interactive relationship with the Trinity. This relationship, made possible through Jesus Christ, enables us to be connected with God in every area of life. As a result, we must see prayer as something that involves every fiber of our being.

When we pray for the curse of the coronavirus to leave our land, we behold God’s glory of creation with our eyes. We hear the wonders of His presence in the singing of the birds and feel His wind embrace us. We breathe prayer into our lungs with each breath of fresh air and thank God for it. As Saint Francis of Assisi wrote, *“Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, so that He who has given Himself totally to you may receive you totally.”* Every fiber of the prayer warrior belongs to God and communicates with God.

Prayer involves listening as much as it does speaking. It is also a call to *“taste and see how good the Lord is”* (Ps. 34:9). Tasting and believing the goodness of God involves the prayer warrior directly in the existential struggle against the belief that God is out to get us. Tasting the goodness of God confronts the lies of the enemy that God doesn’t care and the only rewards “good” people. Tasting the goodness of God in prayer involves being baptized in His grace and accepting Him at His Word when He says, *“Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden.”*

To pray means to breathe in the life of the Spirit of God by exhaling fear and unbelief and inhaling God's grace and goodness. The prayer warrior not only speaks, hears, tastes, and smells God's goodness in prayer, but, like the woman who was bleeding in Luke 8:43-48, touches the very hem of Jesus' garment. This touch involves grasping the impossible, knowing that with God all things are possible. Touching the hem of His garment means refusing to believe the lies and accusations of Satan and instead receive the promises of Scripture and make them our own. After all, as the very temple of the Holy Spirit, can we not grasp with certainty the pillars of His presence?

True prayer warriors are strengthened and empowered through the promises of Scripture. Martin Luther, who once said he had so much to do on a certain day that he had to pray for an extra hour, declared, "*Our Lord God could not but hear me; I threw the sack down before His door. I rubbed God's ear with all His promises about hearing prayer.*" Jesus Himself reminds us that we are to hammer away in prayer until a breakthrough comes (Luke 18:1-8; 11:5-13).

Prayer not only changes the world, but it also challenges us to take new steps of faith in obedience to God's Word. Isn't that what N.T. Wright, the professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews meant when he said, "As the Spirit laments within us, so we become small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell."

As prayer warriors let us pray for the victory of God over the corona virus, oppression, injustice and unemployment resulting in hunger and homelessness. Let us fix our prayers on the divine possibility available to our lives, community and ministry.

In the battles we encounter daily, let us never forget to put on the full armor of God as we take up the sword of the Word and the weapon of Prayer (Eph.6:10-20). As Walter Wink writes, "When we pray, we are not sending a letter to a celestial White House where it is sorted among piles of others. We are engaging in an act of co-creation, in which one little sector of the universe rises up and becomes translucent, incandescent—a vibratory center of power that radiates the power of the universe."

Prayer based action allows us to respond according to the will of God to the cries of those who are hurting in the midst of the corona virus. That is what NT Wright meant when he said that out of the prayers of lament can emerge, "*new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding and new hope.*"

These new possibilities and new acts of kindness will involve new opportunities for the people of God to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and work for justice that involves health care for the poor and elderly and much more. It involves the people of God praying for a scientific discovery for a cure for the coronavirus will be discovered. Along with this discovery, let us pray that an awakening will take place where individuals will discover that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Yours in His Service,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Larry Rice". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Larry Rice