

**How do we fix what(ever) is wrong with the world?** It's a question that often lives near the surface of our lives and then comes rushing to the surface after a week like we've just seen. We've seen another round of contentious elections, another act of evil with a mass shooting, and another tragedy with wildfires raging in the same community as the mass shooting. It's the kind of week that feels like wound on top of wound, and none of the politicians making the loudest noises seem to fix anything. As Christians, how do we go about fixing whatever is wrong with the world?

A couple of options are **prayer & action**. You may have heard that **prayer made the news** last week. But not in the way we'd ever hope. The mother of a young man killed in the mass shooting had this to say. She said, "I don't want prayers. I don't want thoughts.... [She said] I hope to God nobody else sends me any more prayers."<sup>1</sup> Painful as that is to hear, she's right. Offering "**thoughts & prayers**" has become one of the most heartless ways of responding to evil in our world. Not bc prayer is useless; far from it. But when "thoughts & prayers" are offered as public bandages (without any follow through) they become an obstacle for the difficult work that we're called to engage. Sentimental feelings framed as "thoughts & prayers" will never change the world.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/11/09/thousand-oaks-parents-i-dont-want-prayers-i-dont-want-thoughts-i-want-gun-control/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.bc26db589809](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/11/09/thousand-oaks-parents-i-dont-want-prayers-i-dont-want-thoughts-i-want-gun-control/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.bc26db589809)

So what about **action**? What about rolling up our sleeves and charging into the world like characters on a home renovation show? Maybe the world is a really big fixer upper project. I love those shows. But I have a theory about why they're so popular. I think it's because we're hungry for something deeper. I think we're starving to believe in the rescue & redemption of our world. We're starving for evidence that nothing will ever be lost, and all things can be made new. And silly as they are, home renovation shows touch a nerve by offering one small piece of hope. The problem, of course, is that our lives are never as simple as a renovation. No amount of community organizing, public education, politics, or military spending can fix the brokenness of our world.

We need a better approach.

Prayer & action are both vital, but the key for Christians is understanding the role they play. I think it works like this. **Prayer & action are both ways of cooperating with God's work to rescue & heal.** Let me say it again....

The key is cooperating with God. Prayer & action are ways of participating in *God's* work. Unless we start with God, we'll either end up reducing them to sentimentality or elevating them to idols. *Without God, prayer becomes heartless; it becomes "thoughts & prayers."* *Without God, politics, organizing or education become dehumanizing.* God's work must be the starting point for our work.

Here's a suggestion. Memorize these verses from today's Psalm and never

forget: *Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that [we] rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives sleep to his beloved* (Psa. 127:1-2). Have we ever thought that anxiety may be a sign that we've wandered from God? All our striving simply produces the bread of anxious toil if we're disconnected from the God who gives rest.

**How do we fix whatever is wrong with the world?** The first thing we can do is recognize where God is already at work. It's one of the first lessons drilled into clergy in our training for clinical chaplaincy. The most useless, or damaging, thing a hospital chaplain can do is to go charging into a room without paying attention to God. God is already present in that room long before anyone else arrives. **Our job is recognizing what God is already doing and then joining God's work.** It's often slow, and humbling because God is more patient than us.

We could say the same thing about our work in the world. One of the most damaging, things Christians can do is to go charging into the world without paying attention to God. All our striving is anxious toil if we don't watch & listen to God. That's where Scripture comes in. Bc Scripture trains our attention on the God's work to rescue & heal. Scripture allows us to begin recognizing God's work in the world. Without Scripture "God's work" easily becomes a label for our own anxious toil.

Today, our OT and Gospel readings invite us to recognize God's work in the world, and to integrate our work with God's work. At the risk of oversimplification we could put it like this: **Ruth** is about our action; the **Gospel** is about our prayer. Together, they invite us to cooperate with God's work to rescue & heal the world.

Our passage from Ruth reads a lot like a seduction scene. And that's troubling. Bc seduction is the opposite of cooperation. Seduction is about using people. It's about getting what we want, not what God wants. Sometimes that's how this passage is read. But we'll only make that mistake if we haven't read the whole story. In the story of Ruth, context is everything.

The book begins with a famine in Bethlehem (ironically, a name that means *house of bread*). A famine in the House of Bread, drives people away, including the family of woman called Naomi. Naomi's husband brings Naomi & their sons to a foreign land. The 2 sons marry 2 foreign girls, including Ruth, and then all the men die, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law bereft & destitute.

From that moment, this book becomes an action story. Their survival depends on their ability to cooperate with God's work to rescue & save. They're powerless on their own. They're *poor*, in a world of subsistence. They're *women*, in a world of men. They're *barren*, in a world where children are the only form of social security.

They're powerless, until Naomi hears that God has ended the famine in

Bethlehem. So she springs into action. Naomi returns to Bethlehem, the house of bread, the land of her people, bc that's where God is (re)building a house of life & peace. Naomi's job is to cooperate with God. Ruth, her widowed daughter-in-law, is better off staying in her own land, but she joins Naomi at great risk bc she also believes that Naomi's God is building a house of life & peace. These two helpless women understand one thing very clearly: *Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. But God gives rest to his beloved.*

They arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of a harvest and Ruth becomes a glorified scavenger; foraging grain at the edge of a rich man's field. And even then, she discovers God at work. Bc it just so happens to be the field of Naomi's relative; a man named Boaz who's legally entitled to rescue them.

That's the setup for today. So today, when Naomi says she needs to find "security" for Ruth, she's cooperating with the work that God has already been doing. And even then, the best advice she can offer Ruth is to throw herself on the mercy of Boaz. This so-called seduction scene isn't some fatal attraction. It's a plea for survival. It's a property transaction more than a romance. And it's going to cost Boaz. If he redeems these women, any inheritance reverts to the bloodline of Naomi's husband. Boaz gets nothing. He's essentially taking on debt without the promise of a payoff. It doesn't make any sense – unless he also recognizes the LORD is building a house. *Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it*

*labor in vain. But the LORD gives rest to his beloved.*

Ruth is about God's work to build a house of life & peace for the weak & vulnerable. It's about God's work to rescue & heal. Everyone else is learning how to cooperate with God's work. And there's also this. **The most important action in the story is driven by sacrificial love.** The most famous part of the book isn't the passage we hear today. The most famous part is Ruth's profession of love for Naomi. You see, instead of returning to her family, Ruth binds herself to Naomi, saying, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God," (Ru. 1.16).

Sacrificial love drives the action forward. Without love the story would have come to a crashing end. Ruth's sacrificial love is what allows everyone else to cooperate with God's work to rescue & heal. No wonder she becomes the great-grandmother of King David, and the ancestor of Jesus himself – bc the Lord builds the house. That's Ruth.

The Gospel, we could say, is about **sacrificial prayer**. It's about prayer that risks everything to cooperate with God's work to rescue & heal. Today's Gospel divides neatly in two halves. The **first half** is a denunciation of religious con-artists, the scribes. The **second half** is an acclamation of religious devotion, the widow. The **scribes** care about long robes, the widow would have had humble robes. The scribes care about public greetings, the widow is anonymous. The

scribes care about the best seats at prominent gatherings, the widow would have had no seat. The scribes build their wealth on the backs of the weak & vulnerable. The widow sacrifices her wealth in an act of devotion. “For the sake of appearance [the scribes] say long prayers,” (Mk. 12:40). For the sake of devotion the widow offers herself as a living prayer.

In this story, **the widow is the one whose devotion resembles Jesus himself**. Like the widow, Jesus will be devoured by powerful people protecting their own interest. Like the widow, Jesus will sacrifice himself to a corrupt system. And Jesus agonizes over that decision. He pleads with God for another way, bc nobody wants to the throw away their life to for a corrupt system. Jesus & the widow both offer themselves as a loving sacrifice for the sake of cooperating with God's work to rescue & heal.

And just like Ruth, love is the driving action. That's how love works. **Love will both drive us to our knees in prayer, and then drive us to our feet in action**. When we allow our love of God to drive us to our knees and to our feet, the promise we hear today in Hebrews is that Jesus – right now – is appearing in God's presence on our behalf (Heb. 9:24). The promise is that Jesus, who sacrificed himself, will come again to save those who eagerly wait for him (Heb. 9:28).

In honor of Veteran's Day, let me close with a story that illustrates what this kind of love can look like. It's the story of a soldier, Desmond Doss. Doss was a

humble man with a mind-boggling resume. He is, “the only conscientious objector to receive the Medal of Honor for his actions during the Second World War.”<sup>2</sup> We need to pause and let that sink in. A conscientious objector is someone who *refuses* military service. The Medal of Honor is the highest *decoration* for military service. They’re practically opposite categories. They shouldn’t even go together. Except, **we never know how God will transform our familiar categories when sacrificial love drives us to our knees in prayer and then drives us to our feet in action.**

That’s the story of Desmond Doss. He was a devout Seventh Day Adventist who served as a combat medic in the most horrific conditions of war. His story was depicted a couple of years ago in a movie called, *Hacksaw Ridge*, because the conditions of war were just that horrific. 500 of the 800 men in his Battalion were killed when in Okinawa when they walked into a trap. And in the middle of that carnage, Desmond Doss, the only unarmed man, “ran back and forth through a Japanese killzone for FIVE HOURS STRAIGHT, pulling wounded soldiers out of the battlefield, dragging them over to the only means of escaping the death field – a 40-foot cliff ... – and then lowering them down to safety using a ... pulley system he tied himself out of ropes.”<sup>3</sup> According to NPR, “The particulars of

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond\\_Doss](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Doss)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.badassoftheweek.com/index.cgi?id=528487830784>

Doss's heroism [in Okinawa] sound like something from the New Testament: He repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire to drag or carry wounded soldiers to cover.”<sup>4</sup> And in the process he single-handedly rescued 75 men.

How do we fix whatever is wrong with the world? If our Scriptures and the lives of people like Desmond Doss are any indication, there's no limit to the saving & rescuing work of God when sacrificial love drives us to our knees in prayer and then drives us to our feet in action. That's how Christians fix whatever is wrong with the world. That's how we follow Jesus. That's how we cooperate with God, who is always building a house of life & peace to rescue & heal the world. *Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/03/499439659/a-brave-army-medic-saves-lives-in-hacksaw-ridge-mel-gibsons-return-to-directing>