

Stock responses to devastating events, platitudes like “never again,” or “thoughts and prayers,” have become offensive. “Thoughts and prayers” is no longer heard as an expression of compassion but code for, “I don’t want to take action to prevent more heartache in the future.”

Jesus didn’t teach us to pray so that we could be passive in the face of suffering. In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus offers a parable about a persistent neighbor whose shameless audacity will eventually get him the help he needs.

Prayer should be like knocking on your neighbor’s door in the middle of the night demanding loaves of bread. If the neighbor doesn’t want to get up because he and his children are already nestled comfortably in bed, Jesus’ advice is to keep banging on the door until he gives in.

Prayer, according to Jesus, is meant to be bold, persistent, uncomfortable; it’s meant to get results. Jesus advises, *Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.* Do we believe Jesus? Isn’t it easier to accept things as they are than to shamelessly bang on the door of indifference to get justice?

When Martin Luther King, Jr., was living and working in Montgomery, Alabama, he came home one late night. The phone rang. He answered and heard an ominous voice—a man threatening to kill King and his family if he didn’t stop leading in the struggle for civil rights.

King and others had received similar threats in the past, but for some reason, this one stuck with him. It scared him. He couldn’t go back to sleep. So, he went into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee and he began to pray. He describes this time as a moment of reckoning with his faith.

He knew he would either need to put his trust in God wholeheartedly, or he would be consumed by fear and despair. If God wasn’t really with him, then how could he possibly go on? He prayed all night and eventually the spirit of God overwhelmed him, and he was filled with deep peace and conviction.

Days later, his house was bombed. Years later, just months after sharing this story publicly in a sermon, King was shot and killed. The good gift God gives to those who ask is the Holy Spirit. This gift, the Holy Spirit, is not a guarantee of a life of luxury and ease, but of a life in conflict with all that is unholy.

For King, prayer was not just a private practice of piety, it was the fuel and reassurance that inspired remarkable action in the world. It was the energy and life-force behind a movement of social change.

Jesus wanted our prayers to lead us to difficult places; to challenge us to do uncomfortable things in his service; to give hope. Martin Luther King, Jr., faced the threat of bombing and death, but his connection to God through prayer gave him the courage to persist in the face of the unimaginable.

His persistence and the persistence of so many other civil rights leaders ended formal segregation and ensured voting rights for all people. Doors that had been sealed shut began to crack open. Questions that had gone unheard began to be answered. Needs that had been neglected began to be met.

At the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Bryan Stevenson has helped create a museum and memorial that tells the story of racial violence and oppression in our society from slavery to lynching to Jim Crow to mass incarceration. Stevenson's work is rooted in a deep sense of prayer in action.

In 2016 at Christ Church in Charlotte, NC, Stevenson prayed: God, we are praying for your courage, for you to give us the will, give us the heart, give us the mind, give us the spirit, to draw closer to you.

And by drawing closer to you, draw closer to your people—
your people who are suffering,
your people who are struggling,
your people who are incarcerated,
your people who are hungry,
your people who are naked,
your people who need us to be near them
to show them your grace and mercy.

Prayer, as Jesus taught it, is shamelessly knocking in the middle of the night on doors shut by indifference to the suffering of God's people, knocking until they are opened, if not by compassion, then by a desire for a peaceful night's sleep.