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Three Inaugural Prayers

There are prayers, and then there are prayers.

There are personal prayers that we pray in secret. We speak to our divinity with words asking, imploring, and sometimes angrily demanding some thing, act, mercy, knowledge. There are prayers we pray without words. Our sighs and tears speak a language only God can translate. Our prayers become the place we take our helplessness. There are prayers of praise and thanksgiving that we pray for moments of perfect contentment. A smile of silent satisfaction is the prayer. There are prayers of happy laughter and dance celebrating the joy of just being alive.

There are prayers we pray with intimate others. We pray with our closest friends about worries and fears we can only share with someone we trust implicitly. There are prayers we pray with our beloved, prayers of miles, touches, hugs, satisfied desire.

There are public prayers. These are prayers we pray within the context of our faith communities. We pray as part of a worship experience with people who read the same holy texts, sing the same songs, observe the same holy days in the same ways with the same food, and the same traditions. We call God by the same name. There are prayers we pray in local communities in interreligious gatherings. Believers of different faith traditions gather, but everyone is still a believer.

Then there are national prayers. There are the prayers we pray for a democratic republic, for a non-sectarian nation. Whenever we pray out loud in the company of others, it becomes both communication and communion. It becomes a nexus of horizontal and vertical intersection where our personal petitions meet the will of the Divine and the needs of our fellow human beings, nature and creation. It becomes a way we may find common ground. Thinking about such national prayers, it is important to consider who prays, to whom they pray, and for what they pray.

Three inaugural prayers. Three preachers: The Rt. Rev. V. Gene Robinson, Rev. Rick Warren and Rev. Joseph Lowery. The Rt. Rev. Robinson is an openly Gay non-celibate bishop of the Episcopal Church. His ordination has caused a storm in the Anglican Communion. It shines a light on the difficulties many faith communities are having making rigid traditions more elastic to accommodate a new understanding of God's love for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people.

The Rt. Rev. Robinson prayed his prayer at the opening inaugural event at the Lincoln Memorial –“We Are One.” He prayed to the God “of our many understandings.” He prayed to a Queer God, a God who comports with queer theory’s understanding of itself,” an identity without an essence.” This God is a God who is explicit in H/er understanding that S/he is a subject to which the believer provides the predicate. The Rt. Rev. prayed a Queer prayer; he asked for what we do not usually want. He asked these things for the sake of the weak and for the marginal. The Rt. Rev. Robinson asked for tears, anger and discomfort. He asked these things so that we would remember the poor, oppressed, and sexually exploited. He also prayed for patience, humility, compassion, generosity, and “freedom from mere tolerance.” He communicated to the nation that mere tolerance is different from and less than a genuine embrace of love for those who are different.

On the day of the inauguration, Rev. Rick Warren offered the invocation. He prayed under a brilliant bracing spacious sky, Warren practices large politics. An evangelical Southern Baptist, mega-church pastor, his politics range from anti-abortion, anti-gay marriage, to advocacy for peace, environmental responsibility, the poor, and ministry to those afflicted and affected by HIV-AIDS. He is a multi-dimensional and controversial figure. Rev. Warren prayed his prayer to an Almighty father God who owns everything and for whom everything exists. “History is your story,” Warren prayed. His is a powerful God of the powerful. He spoke of God in terms that Jews, Christians and Muslims use. He spoke of America as a land of “unequaled possibility.”

He prayed for the soon to be inaugurated president that God would grant him wisdom, humility, courage, integrity, compassion, and generosity. He prayed that God would help remember that what unites us is a “commitment to freedom and justice for all.” He asked for forgiveness. “When we fail to treat our fellow human beings and all the Earth with the respect that they deserve, forgive us.” He prayed for the nation, among other things, that God grant us civility. Rev. Warren reminded us that we are all accountable to a higher power. He prayed in the name of Jesus, making a personal confession while he called Jesus by his Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Spanish names. Then he ended with the Lord’s Prayer.

He has been criticized for his decision to end with the Lord’s Prayer, a prayer ubiquitous in the Christian tradition. However, it is important to remember that this prayer is the prayer of a Jewish rabbi. It is the prayer of a prophet of Islam. It is a prayer that does not name God. It is a radical prayer that takes us to a new politics, economics and sociology without confining God to any particularity. It is a spacious prayer.

Finally, Joseph Lowery. Full disclosure: I love Joseph Lowery. I love him with the love one has for one's ancestors and elders who we honor because of their courage and sacrifice that cleared a path through the wilderness so that our way would be easier. I love his commitment to justice and his elder honesty. It is an honesty that comes when one is just too close to the end of life to waste time on polite lies, even when the lie is silence. Lowery upset many people at the funeral of Coretta Scott King when, in the presence of two Presidents Bush, he spoke about going to war in Iraq when there were no weapons of mass destruction. He spoke of "weapons of misdirection" and criticized a nation that could find money to fight wars but that could not find money for the poor.

Rev. Lowery prayed to a God of our weary years and our silent tears, taking those words from James Weldon Johnson's hymn "Lift Every Voice and Sing." When I was a girl, we called it the Negro national anthem. He prayed to a God who has got the whole world in His hands, but who works through us. Lowery gave thanks, and like the other two, asked blessings on the new president, his family and administration. Rev. Lowery prayed for help: "help us to make choices on the side of love, not hate. Help us to hold on to the spirit of fellowship." This descendant of enslaved Africans whose uncompensated labor built the capitol building and the white house prayed for God to help us work: "help us then, now Lord, to work for that day when nation shall not lift up sword against nation. . . help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get back, when brown can stick around, when yellow will be mellow, when the red man can get ahead man, and when white will embrace the right."

In this admonition, Lowery took a negative description of the realities of color in America commonly heard in the black community and turned it into a positive thing. Yet, it was this part of his prayer that caused consternation. Some people thought it was unnecessarily divisive to single out white people for the hope they will one day embrace the right. Again he showed his elder honesty. This wise man knows that the election of Barack Obama to the highest office in the land does not erase racism from our national and global reality. He knows that white people still control the levers of power in business, government, culture and society. This power is not always used righteously. He was correct to remind us of this, especially at the moment of our collective national and global euphoria. His was a prophetic prayer prayed by a preacher from a prophetic tradition. And nations hate prophets.

These men prayed to different aspects of the Divine – the God of many understandings, the almighty father God, the God of weary years and silent tears who give us the strength to work toward a better world. Their petitions communicated a transcendent imperative to work together for righteousness that is justice. They each recognized the crying needs of a world still longing for peace.

Each of these men, in their own way is controversial. Controversy continues after the prayers and the inaugural days now belong to history. But Barack Obama, having sat under the teaching preaching of Rev. Jeremiah Wright JR for twenty years, knows in his bones that any minister worth his or her salt ought to be controversial. They ought to make us squirm in our seats, question our own self righteousness, pull us, push us out of our quotidian comfort, and inspire us to do better.