



Living (and Praying) in Different Worlds

A crane operator working on the new Vikings stadium in downtown Minneapolis climbs every day to his perch 300 feet above the city and is amazed at what he can see: “car crashes, police chases and the incoming weather system at the farthest reaches of the horizon.”* At the farthest reaches of the horizon—that’s my point. His horizon broadens dramatically from the top of his crane, as high as the football field he is helping construct will be long. It takes “15 heart thumping minutes” for him to reach his cab, which might serve him better than a whisk-you-up elevator, since it allows him to prepare for such a striking change in viewpoint.

On my first trip to Germany for a semester-abroad study program, our advisor insisted we travel by ship—a slow student ship, seven days. You need it, he claimed, to get the full significance of being in such a different place. Now, it’s just a few hours, so we can think the distance doesn’t matter, though, of course, it still does.

Horizons matter. Location matters—physical location, cultural location, spiritual location. How will that affect our life of faith, our life of prayer? Serving unofficially as “pastor” of an African Lutheran congregation (because there was no one else to do it), I realized how differently prayer functioned there. An African parishioner was ill, and I was asked to visit her. Okay, been there, done that—but not like this. More than once, as a pastoral visitor in an American hospital, I felt tolerated at best, sometimes hardly that. What I felt and heard, though unspoken, was, “Get out of the way, or make it quick; we have serious work to do here!” True, hospitals are different, and times have changed, but that was my experience as parish pastor decades ago.

Not so in Harare, Zimbabwe. Learning that the pastor had been called, the entire family gathered around the bed, the nurse drew the curtains and made things ready, just as she would have done for a physician entering the room to treat the patient. This was an event, honored by both hospital and family. The room was full of expectancy. Something real was happening here. Family members held hands as I read scripture and prayed. And God seemed palpably present. I sensed a different horizon than I had known in my briefer and somehow more detached American visits.

An African friend made the encounter in the other direction. He was taken out of his physical and spiritual world and brought to an entirely different one, be-

*Rochelle Olson, “Top of their profession,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 4, 2014, B1.

cause he had developed such skill as a stone sculptor that his name and work had become known worldwide, so he was invited to New York City for a display and demonstration of his sculpture. He entered the New York art world where he was wined, dined, and celebrated, but it was a world that he could not understand and one in which, finally, he could not stay. The problem was that this new world was to him “godless.” Whether or not any of the people there believed in God or went to church or synagogue was not the point. The public arena, the public conversation was literally godless. “God” simply did not show up in any part of the daily conversation. For my African friend, that was incomprehensible and threatening. In his world, God was present in every moment, in every conversation, as real as the other members of his family. How could you go a day or an hour or a minute without including God? My friend returned home, because he could not live, he said, in that “godless” world. The air trip had been easy, but the spiritual disconnect simply could not be bridged.

The problem for me is that the “godless” Western world is my first and most natural “horizon”—which, by definition, makes prayer more problematic. I fully realize that this is not true for others, that I speak only for myself. As I have said often, yes, I believe in God, but sometimes I have to remind myself. My African friend does not. What does this mean? My spiritual worldview was certainly altered by my African experience, for the better, I think, but, for good and ill, the chemist I once was still lives within, and mine is a “show me” (and godless?) world.

Yes, I pray, and I think it matters—both to me and God—but it doesn’t always come as naturally as I might wish. Usually, I need the help of others, praying better in communal or liturgical settings than at home “in my closet.” Does that matter? Probably. Still, I am grateful to understand theologically that my prayer is heard not because of my feelings, but because of God’s. God is present, because God is present, whether I feel it as palpably as in that African hospital room or, maybe, hardly at all. Did I not believe that, my only prayer might be the haunting lament, “Is anybody out there?” God, faith, Bible, Christian community, and my own experience remind me that there is—indeed, not only out there, but in here, even in the moments of prayer vacuum or doubt. No wonder Isaiah was always my favorite course: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isa 43:1)—God’s call, not mine, even as I struggle to respond faithfully and prayerfully in my “godless” world.

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