

[Opinion](#)
[Spirituality](#)



Parishioners at Christ the King Catholic Church, Ann Arbor, Michigan (Unsplash/Sarah Noltner)



by Amy Morris-Young

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There are many moments in Mass where I can be counted on to cry. Thankfully for my very private husband — after 20 years together, he still cringes when I smooch him in public — I usually do not create a complete spectacle of myself. This is not loud embarrassing sobbing, but a hot sting of sudden tears that compels me to put my hands over my face, in reaction to certain words and music, time after time.

Since I was a shorter, chubbier person at St. Euphrasia Elementary School in Granada Hills, California, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes in morning Mass, amidst the huddled crowd of all the other kids just waking up, the cadences of liturgy have both comforted and stirred me.

For example, during the uncountable times I have sung "Make me a Channel of your Peace," based on the Prayer of St. Francis, my voice will reliably catch in my throat at certain phrases. The words of that song — "Oh, Master, grant that I may never seek so much to be consoled as to console" — can be relied upon to pierce my heart with twin arrows of guilt over my own native selfishness and renewed commitment to strive to serve others first.

The lyrics of that song, as well as those from "Whatsoever You Do," taken from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25 — "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me" — seem to have seeped under my skin and into my cells.

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When I encounter folks standing or sitting on corners, holding pieces of cardboard with imploring words scribbled on them, I am ashamed to admit that my first instinct is often to look quickly away, and avoid eye contact. But then the stereo in my soul invariably rolls tape: "When I was hungry, you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink." Many sandwiches and cups of coffee have been and will be handed over to the silent strains of that tune.

It is problematic for me when the congregation stands and joins hands to say the Lord's Prayer. Because my hands are otherwise engaged, I know that I won't be able to hide it when those words compel spasms of emotion in my goofy face. This prayer is attributed directly to Jesus in both the books of Matthew and Luke, and the words "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" always hit me hard.

To the fixer that I am by nature, that phrase is a soft hammer from above. It reminds me that for all my busy plans and machinations, this life is not governed by my intentions, but by God's. It is an instant humbler. All my buzzing about is stopped dead, and in that moment of stillness, I remember who is really running things. There is terror in that moment, the realization that those we love are not ours, but gifts. And as much as I might try, I can only be grateful and appreciate my time with them. I can't keep them. I certainly can't control them, or anything else.

The next line, "Give us this day our [daily](#) bread" quite literally hits me in the gut. Because it is all about trust, and surrender. Success to some might be money in the bank, or a status job, or a fancy home or car or whatever. But to me, security is a full pantry and well-stocked freezer, and the conviction that I can feed my family, no matter what.

These words remind me that keeping our bellies full may not be up to me, but that as scary as that is, it will ultimately be okay. That day to day, God has my back, if only I can believe it enough to let go and relax into Him. That is a tough one.

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" is the show-stopper. Wow. That phrase turns me inside out, every time. Even typing it here, the page in front of me is suddenly blurry.

I don't know about you, but for me, that is like Jesus standing in front of me compelling me to look him in the eyes. I am busted, right there. There is no hiding from that gaze. My sins — my unkind acts and perhaps even unkind failures to act — are transparent to him. And my unwillingness to forgive, the lists of hurts from others fiercely clenched in my fists, is just as glaring.

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Jesus is super smart, because he understands that of course I want to have my own sins forgiven. But to tie that to the requirement of forgiving others to seal the deal, well, that is just a stroke of brilliance.

I am awed and humbled by that world-changing logic, and it is the hub of everything else. To love my enemy, to love my neighbor as myself, to treat others as I would be treated, it is all right there. I must peel off and lay down my armor, constructed from layers of memories of past hurts and traumas, to avail myself of being forgiven. It is scary, it is vulnerable, it is counter-intuitive. Like Jesus urging us to "turn the other cheek," it implies letting the bullies win. But it is the only way, the third way between winning and losing, to come through it together, healed.

It makes such sense that we reach this humbled place right before going up to receive communion. I admit to covering my face and saying that final prayer the old way — "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." I think the new way — "I am not worthy to have you under my roof" — smacks of elitism, because what about the people who don't have a home and a roof? In an earlier prayer, I also refuse to say "consubstantial." That is just weird.

My tiny protests aside, by the time I give that final plea before receiving the Eucharist, I feel washed and ready. A sacrament is about to be bestowed on me, to hopefully give me enough grace and strength until the next one. When I leave church and walk to the car, I have abandoned my chainmail covering on the pew, and instead am warmed by a cloak of God's love. I am forever grateful to the words and music that crumble my self-protective shell, over and over.

[Amy Morris-Young graduated from and taught writing at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.]