

Acts 6:1 - 7:2a, 44-60

A firestorm of sorts recently broke out over a new book of devotions edited by the progressive Christian author Sarah Bessey, called *A Rhythm of Prayer*. It features a number of different types of prayers written by theologians, pastors and authors from various Christian traditions, and hit the bestseller list when it was released in February.

The prayers in the book include a benediction by Bessey, a poem by Potawatomi Christian author and speaker Kaitlin Curtice, a prayer based on a chicken soup recipe by pastor and peacemaker Osheta Moore, “A Liturgy for Disability” by author and disability advocate Stephanie Tait and even blank pages for those times when it feels like there aren’t words.

But it’s the “Prayer of a Weary Black Woman” by clinical psychologist and womanist theologian Chanequa Walker-Barnes that has caught the attention of [Fox News](#) and conservative Christians on Twitter, some tweeting at Target to remove the book from its stores.

One line from the prayer in particular has caused the backlash, which reads: “Dear God, Please help me to hate White people.”ⁱ

The prayer is written in a form that should be familiar to all Jews and Christians, the imprecatory psalm, or psalm of lament. Psalms of lament begin with a statement of wretchedness and end with an expression of trust that God will redeem the situation.

Chanequa Walker-Barnes says that the back story to this prayer is that a white person she considered a friend used the N-word in a casual conversation. Their use of that word showed that they did not take seriously the hurt that she as a Black woman carries around, that’s triggered by such language. Walker-Barnes wanted to take to social media, to shame and blast that person, but instead she turned to God and

owned [her rage]. I was truthful to God about what I was struggling with, because I believe that the God who knows us intimately can handle anything we bring. I raged against the different types of White Christians who make the journey toward racial justice so hard.

Just as imprecatory psalms do, the prayer turns to ask God not to let anger and hatred overwhelm her, and to help her continue to love those who hate her. She prays to remain true to the biblical mandate for peace, justice and reconciliation even when she has little hope of its possibility.

But as you might expect in these times, right-wing Christians seized on this prayer as unchristian, politically correct, a direct result of critical race theory and completely unbiblical. They have asked Target to take the book off its shelves. It all sounds eerily like the story of Stephen in Acts 6 and 7.

Acts describes the early church in glowing terms, but even its idealistic description can't hide the fact that there was conflict from the very beginning in the Jerusalem church. The original followers of Jesus were what Luke calls "Hebrews," meaning Aramaic-speaking Jews from Galilee and Judea. As the church grew, it took in not only gentiles but also "Hellenists," meaning Diaspora Jews—Jews from outside of Judea, who had always lived as minorities within gentile communities. Apparently the Hebrews haven't noticed that the widows of the Hellenists don't get the attention that their own widows do, and the Hellenists complain. So the twelve disciples call a big meeting and suggest that they delegate responsibility for feeding widows to a committee, so those who proclaim the word of God don't spread themselves too thin. The people who proclaim will keep proclaiming, but they're going to formalize the feeding duty as another ministry, done by other people.

Great, says everyone, and they choose seven "men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom," all of whom have Greek names and must be Hellenists—diaspora Jews—

except for Nicolaus who's a gentile convert. Stephen is one of the members of the new committee. He's going to make sure the widows all get fed.

But nothing ever goes exactly the way you think it will, and before long Stephen finds himself not feeding but preaching. He gives a long sermon in chapter 7, the gist of which is that the non-Christian Jews who are accusing him of wanting to destroy the Temple should cool off and remember that there was a long period before the Temple existed when God's people were doing just fine, and his opponents don't know how to tell when God has sent a prophet, and they're just killing prophets left and right without even noticing because they're so focused on the damn Temple. This goes over approximately as well as you might expect, and before long Saul is holding the coats of Stephen's accusers and Stephen is getting stoned to death. He was a minority within his own community of Jesus-followers, he was appointed to feed widows, some of whom had been neglected, and now he's dying for something he wasn't even recognized for or appointed to do. It's really not fair.

Luke's main point, I think, is to show how the martyrs of the early church followed the model of Jesus, and how the Holy Spirit guided the spread of Christianity. But I'm intrigued that he told us the story of Stephen with as much back-story and multi-cultural texture as he did, because there's a lesson for us there as well. Stephen was put into an unfair situation, and Luke (or Luke's sources) saw it and learned from it. Amy Julia Becker, a white journalist, wrote about Chanequa Walker-Barnes' prayer that it reminds her of all the people in the Bible who don't want to love the people God wants them to love. She writes that it also humbles her to see herself on the other side of this hatred.

I have been the nice white person who tried to explain away what seem like "little" racist remarks. I am the nice white person fearful of acting as an ally, worried about what other

white people will think, wondering whether it is all too extreme, unwilling to give so much of my time, of my heart. I am the nice white Christian who has done little to repent or to proactively love the vulnerable among us.

If I let this prayer make me uncomfortable, then I will begin to understand why Walker-Barnes might long to hate someone like me.ⁱⁱ

I read Luke today through the lens of Amy Julia Becker's reflections: Stephen got beat up for a situation he neither asked for nor deserved, and while Luke celebrates the power of the Holy Spirit to use even that tragedy, he also wants us to know that it really, really wasn't fair. Stephen and (maybe more important) those who survived him could justifiably cry out, "God, please help me hate Temple-focused Jews! Please help me hate those who are threatened by what I say, and who pick up stones to shut me down!" It shouldn't have happened; it wasn't what Stephen was about within the church, and he didn't ask for it—but he stepped up and met the forces of hatred that had showed up for him. Can I accept that people might be angry at me for things that shouldn't have happened to them? Can I be curious and non-anxious enough to learn about that?

Chanequa Walker-Barnes wrote, after the kerfuffle erupted, that the "critics" are willfully misinterpreting her prayer and CRT to an extent that can only be explained by incompetence or willful maliciousness. They're deeply unfair.

But dammit if God hasn't given me a different spirit, one that insists on looking for goodness and possibility, one that holds holy rage and holy hope together. Many Black women can connect to that prayer, especially those of us who labor for justice within and beyond the church. Loving people who are committed to hating us – to disenfranchising us, incarcerating us, and abusing us in myriad other ways – is hard. And still, we persist.ⁱⁱⁱ

Luke also invites us to experience holy rage on Stephen's behalf *and* holy hope for the oppressed. We don't hear Stephen's inner dialogue, but he dies praying for God to forgive

those who are killing him. He seems to have made it to the point that Walker-Barnes makes it to in her prayer:

But I will trust in you, my Lord. You have kept my love and my hope steadfast even when they have trampled on it. You have rescued me from the monster of racism when it sought to devour me. You have lifted up my head when it was low and healed my heart when it was wounded.

You have not given me up to slavery or to Jim Crow or to the systems of structural oppression, but you have called me to be an agent in your ministry of justice and reconciliation.

And you have not allowed me to languish alone, but you have lighted the path toward beloved community with the loving witness of the ancestors, elders and sojourners who have come before me and who stand with me today.

Thus in the spirits of Fannie and Ida and Pauli and Ella and Septima and Coretta I pray and I press on in love. Amen.^{iv}

We must not let our discomfort with justifiable rage lead us to paper it over and hurry on to the happy ending. But I do take seriously the happy ending; it's just as real as the reason for the rage. That is what the grace of God and the persistence of the Holy Spirit accomplishes. And it's beautifully pictured in the words of Thomas More, who was also unjustly executed, whose thoughts then turned to this story:

More have I not to say (my Lords) but like as the blessed Apostle St. Paul, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, was present, and consented to the death of St. Stephen, and kept their clothes that stoned him to death, and **yet be they now both twain holy saints in heaven, and shall continue their friends for ever**, so I verily trust and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your Lordships have now in earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet together to our everlasting salvation (William Roper, *The Life of St. Thomas More*, paragraph 5-7).

Let us pray.

Holy Giver and Receiver of life,
The blessed Stephen shone with the light of your Holy Spirit. When his opponents took his life, he offered up his spirit to you, and prayed mercy for theirs. May we not be those opponents, and when we are Stephen, may we turn to you with everything that is on our hearts in the confidence that you will redeem it all. Amen.

ⁱ <https://religionnews.com/2021/04/09/why-some-christians-are-upset-target-is-carrying-a-bestselling-book-of-prayers/>

ⁱⁱ <https://religionnews.com/2021/04/09/a-white-christian-response-to-the-prayer-of-a-weary-black-woman/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://drchanequa.com/blog>

^{iv} <https://drchanequa.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/prayer-weary-black-woman.pdf>