

The Evangelical Mind

Praying in Public

By Richard Mouw

I pray in restaurants. It is a practice I learned in childhood, and I have consciously embraced it as an adult.

In certain circumstances, I feel awkward doing so. On some occasions, I even decide not to do it--for example, when I am with folks who might find it unsettling after they have started on their salad for me to stop the conversation for a silent prayer. But in the vast majority of occasions when I eat in a restaurant, I bow my head to pray before taking my first bite.

A Christian friend once asked me about it. "Isn't it a bit artificial to do that kind of thing? I mean, sitting in a booth at Burger King, with noisy kids running around--can you really get yourself into a praying mood?"

My answer was that I seldom find myself in a praying mood while sitting in a restaurant. But I typically don't pray because I am feeling especially "spiritual." If I had to wait for those moods to set in, I would not pray very often! Indeed, it is precisely because the praying mood doesn't come naturally to me that I make it a habit to pray in restaurants.

My restaurant prayers are opportunities for me to pause and remind myself that there is indeed a God whose mercy reaches out to me even when I am sitting in a Burger King booth with noisy kids running past me. I don't need to be in any special kind of mood to give myself that kind of reminder.

Indeed, it is generally not a good practice to wait for a certain kind of mood to set in before acknowledging another person's presence. If I am hurrying through a crowded mall and I suddenly meet someone I know, I greet the person, even though I haven't had time to get into an especially friendly mood. The person is there, and I owe it to her to acknowledge her presence.

It is even more important to acknowledge God's presence in a Burger King.

There is also a larger issue at stake here for me. It is an understatement to say that we are living in an increasingly secularized culture. A few decades ago, it would not have been uncommon for a restaurant chain to post a "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Easter" sign. Today, that is highly unlikely. "Happy Holidays," perhaps, but no explicit reference to a Christian holy day. In our public spaces we are systematically eliminating all reminders of spiritual realities.

I am not enthusiastic about this trend. At the same time, I do sympathize with some of the reasons why people feel that it is necessary. Too often in the past, we Christians have abused our privileges in this regard. A Jewish friend told me once about how painful it was for him to grow up in a small town where almost everyone else was a Christian. When the public school teacher told the children that it was time, just after the Pledge of Allegiance, "to say the prayer that our Lord Jesus taught," my Jewish friend remained silent. The other kids at school taunted him for this. Some even chanted "Christ killer!" to him in the playground. I am very sorry that happened. That was a terrible way to treat him.

So I do not complain loudly about the campaign to eliminate religious symbols from public spaces.

But none of this changes my view of reality. I still believe that wherever we are--whether we acknowledge it or not--we are in the presence of God. There is no distinction between our "private" and "public" lives in God's eyes: "Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (Jeremiah 23:24).

There is no place in all of creation that is outside the scope of God's mercies--not even Burger King. Cheeseburgers and french fries are, properly understood, gifts from the Lord. The children running past my booth are fashioned in the image of their Creator. Fast food restaurants are a part of a larger world in which many people are starving. I find it good for my soul to acknowledge these facts.

And in making my quiet gesture, I might even be able offer a reminder to the people around me that there is more going on in restaurants than meets the secularist eye.