

“Thoughts on Prayer”

**Rev. Dr. Brian Q. Newcomb – David’s United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 18, 2019**

The question I’ve been asked to address in this morning’s “You Asked For It” sermon, is “What is prayer?” The person writing to me, I’m sure speaks for many of us, when she said, “We’ve often been told what prayer is not: a request line to ask God to give us things, and that it doesn’t necessarily keep tragedy from occurring. So, what should be the point of prayer, how can we pray properly? How does prayer influence the world?”

And once again, this is an excellent question, no doubt especially relevant in our time when many of us have grown skeptical of the very idea of prayer, likely because we’ve seen it misused often in ways that are hurtful. We have read the stories of miraculous healings in the Bible, and of course many of us pray for one another whenever we are dealing with illness of any kind. Sometimes the people we’ve prayed for have gotten better, and sometimes they did not, but most of us have not seen, nor do we expect to see, a lame person stand and walk, or a blind person see.

There have been times when we prayed for two people who had cancer, and we are disappointed if the treatments seem to be effective in one person, but the other person died. And, of course we are especially distraught when the person who dies is young, or someone we especially saw as good person, while some other person with a less stellar reputation gets better but our friend does not. Some people have walked away from the church and the faith, because of prayers that didn’t result in a miracle.

So one of the underlying concerns in any question we may have about prayer is the far more challenging question of “why bad things happen to good people,” which is really a question about the nature of God... if God is good **and** powerful, why does God let bad things happen?

And if that question is not challenging enough, and I believe it’s essentially unanswerable, we’ve all heard about the way famous faith healers have taken advantage of the belief and good will of people who are desperate for a cure for their child, often giving the so-called healer all of their

savings in the hope that God will honor that act of faith and give them a miracle, the healing and recovery of their loved one, only to learn that these people are frauds, con-men who are willing to lie and cheat and steal from these most vulnerable people with a very sick child.

So, in this modern age of science we've grown skeptical of any expression of prayer that begins to look like magic or wishful thinking. We've seen the damage done when misplaced faith is aligned with expectations that match our desired outcomes, and God, as we see it, "fails to deliver." We've heard some prayerful people accuse those who remain sick, who don't get better, as not having enough "faith," or the "right kind of faith," or perhaps something in our lives, some sin that we are being judge for... now, that's the very kind of thing that the Book of Job was written to counter, but at times some talk of prayer and healing sounds more like superstition than faith.

So, if prayer is not just so I can present to God my wish list the way Janis Joplin did when she sang, "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz, My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends?" If that's not how or why we are meant to pray, what is the point of prayer, and how can we pray properly?

One of the things that the Gospels tell us about the life of Jesus is that he was someone who had a deep, intimate relationship with God; that sense of connection to the way and will of God was maintained by his active prayer life. Franciscan monk and mystic, Richard Rohr takes note of the many times that Jesus is described in the Gospels as having pulled away from the crowds and the activity of others to "some lonely place to pray."

When Jesus teaches the disciples about prayer in Matthew 6, he warns them against praying publicly in the synagogues for fear of merely stroking one's ego. Rather Jesus speaks of going to a private place, to be with the God who meets us in secret.

Writing about prayer, Frederich Buecher suggests that prayer is an essential human expression: "We all pray whether we think of it as praying or not. The odd silence we fall into when something very beautiful is happening, or something very good or very bad... The stammer of pain at

somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds we use for sighing with over our own lives. These are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to ourselves, but to something even more familiar than ourselves and even more strange than the world."

So, one thing I think we can say about prayer is that it is an acknowledgement that we are not alone in the world left entirely to our own devices. Whether we have a fully developed picture of who or what God is or not, there is this instinctive response to life itself that cries out from inside our inner most being. The beginning of any 12-step recovery program asserts that "we admit that we are powerless... and our lives have become unmanageable." Or as songwriter Steve Earle put it, I came to see that "you are God, and I am not." Prayer begins, then, with the recognition that the world around us is beyond our control, and the feeling that there is a Source, a Someone, a Higher Power if you will, who is behind or beyond what we see and tangibly recognize as reality, that will take the time to listen to us.

Now, when Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them to pray, he begins by naming God in relational terms, he tells them to say "Our Father...", establishing God as an approachable Parent. This affirms not only "who we are," but also "whose we are." We may come to this prayer shaken up, distraught, unclear in our own minds just how we are supposed to deal with the uncontrollable nature of life in the world, given all the chaos, confusion and suffering we see all around us. We may feel lost, but this prayer begins by centering us, affirming our relationship to and with God, stating that we are God's children... it is rooted in the words of our baptism, we are God's beloved. That is who and whose we are.

For Rohr, it is that centering that is most essential on the spiritual journey that is our life together, "Prayer is looking out from a different set of eyes, which are not comparing, competing, judging, labeling or analyzing, but receiving the moment in its wholeness and unwholeness. That is what is meant by contemplation." Like our Buddhist friends, Rohr suggests that prayer grounds us in mindfulness, creating a sense of awareness, so that we see all that is beautiful for what it is, and see also what is not.

The Lord's Prayer invites us to do just that. Once it is established that we are the Children of the Living God, our Divine Parent, we pray that "God's kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Right away we recognize that the situation we are in is not working, for one reason or another we are not living up to God's plan, things may be running well in heaven, but down here life can feel pretty messy. When we are asking for God's "kingdom come," and telling God, "your will be done," we are giving up on the idea that we can solve the problems we face in life on our own terms. Ultimately, whether we say it this way or not, we are praying for Shalom – the Hebrew word for peace, life, creative wholeness, which includes justice. We're asking God to set right in the world what we can see plainly is not right, but more than that we are committing ourselves as God's co-laborers to work for peace, wholeness, creativity, renewal and justice.

As a smart theologian once said, "First you pray for the hungry, and then you feed them, that's how prayer works." That is the message of the New Testament book of James in a nutshell. Faith, the writer tells us, is never intended to be a mere collection of abstract beliefs about God, it's not enough just to pray pious prayers, or say the right things. James says, if there is faith in us, we will do the works of righteousness, that is we will become partners with God in setting the world aright.

Now, Meghan Henning, one of our members who is a professor of NT and early church origins down at UD, wrote a piece this last week, reflecting on the violence of the shootings in our city's Oregon District, and the response of one public preacher that the reason there is so many of these mass shootings in our country is a "lack of thought and prayers." She warns of the kind of prayer that reduces God to a cosmic "Santa Claus," a theology that suggests prayer is like a gumball machine... you put in the coin or prayer, and get your reward... the problem with this thinking being that it fails to deal with the complexity of human cultural interactions, and if things don't go as desired, often gets reduced to 'blaming the victim,' heaping additional violence on the one who is already suffering.

The problem here, I think, is that in this highly materialistic world we've allowed prayer, like every other currency in human experience, to lose its

intrinsic value and purpose because we've focused only on the tangible results. What we lose sight of is the gift and value of the experience by focusing on the outcome, did you get the thing you asked for? When prayer becomes one more commodity, one more way to become preoccupied with possessions that promise worry-free outcomes, or the idea that "my life is blessed," we lose our place in the great majesty and mystery of life itself. Remember, prayer is about a deep calling to our truest selves, and the perspective of knowing we are the beloved children of God, and no matter what we think we know about external experience of our lives, prayer is the experience that God is with us.

Richard Rohr affirms what we have found to be true, that "Prayer is about changing you, not about changing God." This changing of our mind is meant to open us so to the experience of God so that "things like infinity, mystery, and forgiveness can resound within us." That word resonance is the word Rohr uses to describe the way we become attuned to the way and will of God, it is an awareness where we can truly "live and move and have our being." So the ultimate place of prayer in the Christian life, as best I have come to understand it, is that it is the underlying connection between us and God who has made us for life. In prayer we rest in the presence of the one who assures us of who we are, and whose we are.

When that resonance comes to rest deeply with in us, we get a glimpse of what the scripture refers to as "the peace that passes human understanding." In those moments of clarity, we can let go of all our efforts to manipulate and control the world, and the people and circumstances of our lives, and accept the whole of it—the beauty and mystery of it—for the gift that it is. It is in those moments when, like mystic Meister Eckhart, we see that "If the only prayer you say in your entire life is "Thank You," it will be enough."

When Paul writes that people of faith should "pray without ceasing," I think that is what he wants for us, that sense of being connected to God all the time, even as we are busy living fully and completely in the lives we share with one another. In fact, it may only be that when we have that inner resonance, that sense that God is always with us, and for us, that we can

best live our lives fully and completely... that may be what Jesus meant when he said he came that we might have life and have it in abundance.

In that spirit then, we lift our concerns to God, not in anticipation of a miracle that will solve all the conundrums of our human experience, but out of compassion for the people and situations in our lives, we share them with the one who is the Source of Life, knowing that everything we want to say to God is already known. I liken this to Marcus Borg's response to a question asking if he still prays for the people in his lives, when they are sick or troubled, after he had said that in every practical way he'd more or less given up on the idea that God intervenes in the world, that God changes the course of history, even for individuals. Borg responded, saying surely he prays for his wife and children and friends when they are sick, surely he prays for the healing, mending, and fixing of what is clearly broken in the world, he prays for peace and justice, he prays "thy kingdom come, they will be done," because it is an expression of his own compassion, first for his loved ones, but then for the world around him, and the whole of creation. And from those prayers, he said, he feels empowered to go and live in loving ways, so that his life and actions and choices embody the desires expressed in his prayers.

That's why and how we pray for one another, in my opinion. When someone we care about is sick, or facing a challenging situation, of course we pray for them. Our prayers are one expression of our love and care for them, we carry them in our hearts to the Source of all life and love, and then of course we do what we can to embody that love and care through our actions with and for and on their behalf. Do our prayers make a difference? I believe they do. Does it make a difference in your life to know that someone loves you, of course it does. That love may not take away someone's illness, but it absolutely can make a difference. It is out of that love for all of you, that I gladly pray for you, and often. I pray that God will surround you with God's love, protection and care, and whatever comes your way, that God will be with you, by your side, and bring you through it.

In conclusion I like how Mother Theresa worded it. Now usually I try to avoid quoting someone like her in my sermons, because everyone thinks of her as a saint, and therefore none of us who are struggling through our

daily existence can relate to someone like her. But I was impressed by her writings published after her death where she expressed her misgivings, her doubts and fears. Turns out even Mother Theresa experienced all the uncertainty that you and I have learned to live with, an embodiment of that prayer, "Jesus, I believe, help my unbelief." So here is what she said, that I find most helpful on the value of prayer:

"I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that (God) will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, now I pray for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I believe that prayer changes us, and we change things."

Thanks be to God. Amen.