

Shall We Pray?

In planning my sermon schedule for this fall—and after some conversation with our fine Worship Associates Team—on the Sunday following Thanksgiving I'm going to do an "Ask the Minister" sermon. This is one of those little devices my ministerial colleagues and I come up with now and then when we don't want to have to prepare an actual sermon for a particular Sunday—like, say, over Thanksgiving weekend.

I have cards handed out at the beginning of a service and invite those in the congregation to write down a question they'd like to see me answer. The cards are collected and given to me prior to the offering. While the offering is taken I flip through the cards to see which ones I think I can handle. I usually manage to work my way through a dozen or so questions in the course of the time it takes to do a sermon.

On one such Sunday, some years ago, a question I got was: "If you do not have a concept of a personal God, can you still pray?" I don't recall what my 2-3 minute answer to that was at the time. For today, however, my short answer "yes, you can"; my longer answer is the remainder of this sermon.

Before I get into all that, however, I'll note that today is the first installment of a two-part sermon. The second will come next Sunday when my topic will be "Just What Is Atheism?" This is the Auction Sermon from last spring, and for which Wendy McDougall put in the winning bid. Since talking about prayer raises the question of just who or what you may be praying to, then I decided these two topics went together. So, we'll do prayer today and "God or No God" next Sunday.

As is the case with my overall spiritual journey, my approach to prayer has evolved over the course of my life. In the religious setting in which I was raised intercessory prayers were routinely offered on behalf of a member of the congregation who was ill or facing a crisis of some kind.

I still have some very clear memories of a time when, in the Baptist congregation of my youth, a member of that congregation was stricken with leukemia. The man's name was Frank. As his disease advanced nightly prayer meetings were held in the church to pray to God for Frank's recovery. And the advance of Frank's leukemia did stop in ways that were medically hard to explain. He was even able to return to attending church services,

albeit for a time. Because the leukemia didn't really stop, it just slowed down; and slowing down the advance of leukemia—however that happened—is not the same as getting rid of it. Sadly, Frank died some months later at a relatively early age. He and his wife had two young children.

Within the faith stance of that congregation, the way Frank's death was dealt with was to hold that God had allowed him to be with us for longer than had been expected—and we should thank God for that. And then for ways known to God, and which we do not question, God saw fit to call Frank to his heavenly home. And we were to thank God for that as well.

The reason that episode remains so clear in my mind—even as I came to reject the theology behind it—is because I remember the outpouring of love and compassion by that congregation for Frank and his family; and those prayer meetings were really a way of showing their love and care. And it was also a way of keeping the faith of that religious community intact: We prayed to God; God listened to our prayers; and we also have to accept that God did what He did for His own reasons that are beyond our human reasoning.

As I just said, as my own religious and spiritual journey went forth, I let go of the idea of a Supreme Being who could act in such a fashion, which means I stopped praying in this fashion—whether it was on someone else's behalf or my own. But I still struggled, and had debates with myself, on the whole idea of prayer—and the possibility of having a prayerful life—even when I got to the point where I could no longer pray in any traditional manner.

While pondering on all that I came across an article in no less of a secular publication than *The Wall Street Journal* about how some persons in secular professions like medicine and psychology were coming to appreciate the power of the kinds of prayers that I was rejecting. They didn't make me change my mind, but did provide some food for thought nonetheless.

The Journal article was titled "Prayer is Good Medicine." It was written by a Dr. David Matthews, who is a professor at the Georgetown University School of Medicine, and who has written a book on the relationship between personal faith and healing—healing via medical model that is. Matthews begins by recalling how religion of any kind was a taboo subject when he

was in medical school, and how he carried into his medical practice the idea that religion should be confined, as he put it, to “sanctuaries and Sundays.” He then goes on:

“(But) at a certain point in my medical practice I changed. Seeing open, well- marked Bibles next to bed pans, watching sick people turn to faith to help them through chemotherapy, hearing family members in the waiting room pray for strength and support, I discovered that spirit matters to patients and their families.”

Dr. Matthews is, first and foremost, a scientist; that is to say he looks at the world primarily through a scientific lens. So it would stand to reason that he would go to science to bolster his observations. And this is what he writes:

“The medical value of faith is not a matter of faith—but of science. More than 300 scientific studies report that religious commitment is associated with better health... (and with treating) physical disorders...and addictive disorders...”

Matthews has not jumped ship to exclusively embrace faith healing. He remains largely committed to the traditional medical model when it comes to dealing with disease. But, as his words indicate, he has come to more fully appreciate the close tie between body and spirit.

I know it’s easy enough to brush aside most of what Dr. Matthews says here by replying, “Well, yes, prayer is a placebo; and placebos have been proven to work on numerous occasions. That’s all those 300 scientific surveys really prove. Why make any more of it than that?” While there is truth in such a response I’m not convinced it’s the whole truth. We are creatures of body, mind, and spirit; and I believe that not just wholistic healing, but wholistic living in general involves attending to all three of these aspects of our being.

So for whatever placebo effect prayer may have in the settings just described; it’s more than that. Prayer, addressed to a Deity or not, provides a means of integrating our mind, body, and spiritual selves. And it can provide us with a sense of connection to something greater than ourselves whether or not we can define or name it.

So, whether one believes in a traditional God or not, most of us, I believe, do feel within us—even if we cannot fully articulate it—some sense of

connection with a force, power, or presence that is greater than us. This is why I use that words that I do to close our Time of Silence on most Sundays—“The Mystery is that we are connected even when we feel apart. Let us rejoice in the common life and makes of the many, One.”

These words, as I hear and use them, both embrace and go beyond our human connections. The Mystery is that we are connected in some way to this universe in which we live and move and have our being. How do we realize that connection? That is to say: How does one pray in the absence of a Deity while also sensing that we are a part of a Larger Life that both embraces and moves beyond the individual lives we lead.

As we look for ways to meaningfully live within this Larger Life we do indeed, as the late UU minister, the Rev. Gordon McKeeman once put it, find ourselves “addressing a mystery.”

Rev. McKeeman expands upon his point by noting that one addresses Mystery by going to “the end of certainty, to the boundary of all we know, to the rim of uncertainty, to the perimeter of the unknown which surrounds us.” This is one way of conceiving of God that works for me: God as “Ultimate Mystery.” I’ll come back this point next Sunday.

But, staying with our subject for today, how does one pray to an Ultimate Mystery, particularly if prayer is understood in the traditional sense of words and thoughts addressed to a Supreme Being? Well, you look for alternatives; and a good one I’ve recently found is in Anne Lamott’s book *Help, Thanks, Wow—The Three Essential Prayers*. You may recall that I used a few passages from her book *Traveling Mercies* in a sermon several weeks ago.

I’m very taken with Ms. Lamott. I’d love to share a couple cups of coffee with her sometime and swap ideas and experiences on matters of religion and spirituality. When it comes to our respective spiritual journeys, our paths could not have been more different with respect to where they began. She grew up in an atheist household while for me it was evangelical Baptist. But—allowing for some differences of language—she and I have come out largely in the same place, religiously and spiritually speaking, even if she does have more of a thing for Jesus than I do.

Here are a few lines from her book’s Prelude which she titles *Prayer 101*: “You may in fact be wondering what I even mean when I use the word

‘prayer.’ It certainly is not what the TV Christians mean. It’s not for display purposes, like plastic sushi or neon...It is communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding. Let’s say it’s communication from one’s heart to God. Or is that’s too ludicrous a concept for you, to the Good, (to) the force that is beyond our comprehension...Let’s say it’s what the Greeks called the Really Real...Or let’s say it’s a cry from deep within to Life or Love with capital L’s...Or for convenience we could just say ‘God.’”

Whether you opt for Ms. Lamott’s convenience of language or not when it comes to invoking the term “God,” she’s onto something important. To put it personally, there is a part of me that seeks a connection with that which is not me and is beyond me—however I may choose to name it.

Prayer, as I have come to see it, is an attempt to touch what Ralph Waldo Emerson called the “spark of the Divine” that is in all of us, and to sense the presence of the Sacred that lies beyond us as well. It is part of our human condition to reach both within and beyond ourselves when it comes to finding true meaning in our lives, when it comes to finding what is Really Real for us, when it comes to discovering what it is that ultimately sustains us and makes us whole persons.

On that note, let’s pick up for a few minutes on Anne Lamott’s three types of prayers: Help, Thanks, and Wow. A prayer for help—whether actually articulated or not or specifically addressed to anyone or anything or not—is at bottom an acknowledgement of our limitations and our vulnerabilities. It is an awareness that our own resources, strong and resilient as they may be, can only, at certain times, carry us so far.

Ms. Lamott draws on her experiences as a recovering alcoholic and drug abuser in getting at this dimension of prayer. But you don’t have to be in those kinds of straits to appreciate what she’s saying. A prayer for help is a reaching beyond ourselves for some greater sustenance and trusting that it will be there—both from those who love and care about us, as well as from the larger flow of life in which we all move. A prayer for help comes when you’ve given it all you’ve got, and then have to trust that Life, that what you cannot fully see or know of, will still get you there.

For the Thanks part, I’m going to momentarily leave Ms. Lamott and pick up on something I said in a sermon here last fall. They are the words of the 14th century German mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart: “If the only

prayer you ever say in your life is ‘thank you’ that would suffice.” Father Eckhart was a Dominican priest who believed that human beings could encounter the Divine without any intercessors. He did not even feel the need to specify who one was saying “thank you” to, just that “if the only prayer you ever say in your life is ‘thank you’ that would suffice.” The fact that Eckhart was tried by the 14th century Catholic Church for heresy for making such remarks probably means he was getting at the truth.

To Father Eckhart’s words I would add these of the late Rev. Raymond Baughn, a Universalist minister: “Giving thanks has nothing to do with who or what produced the gift. It is rather a way of perceiving our life. Even in the midst of hurt and disappointment, when we see ourselves in a universe that gives us life and touches us with love, we praise.”

I like that. My prayer of “thanks” is not an address to a Deity. It’s my way of perceiving life—even when life wounds, disappoints, or angers me. This kind of prayer is an attempt to maintain an attitude of gratitude rather than words dispatched to a Supreme Being. A prayer of thanks is a way of seeing and knowing ourselves in a universe that gives us life, and in which we find care and inspiration even in the midst of the struggles and defeats that inevitably befall us.

As for the Wow part of Ms. Lamott’s trilogy, I’m guessing we can all identify moments when we’ve been taken out of ourselves to the point of feeling some mystical kind of tie with all that is around us and that engulfs us. Here again is an unarticulated prayer—a moment when that which is within us connects with that which is beyond us.

I go to the late novelist and essayist Kurt Vonnegut for an example of a “Wow” prayer. Vonnegut was a life-long avowed atheist, and a self-identified Unitarian Universalist. In an interview he was once asked what his idea of perfect happiness was. He replied, “Imagining that something, somewhere wants us to like it here.” He then went on to recall just such a moment in his life:

“(It was when) my Finnish publisher took me to a little inn on the edge of the permafrost in his country (of Finland). We took a walk and found frozen ripe blueberries on bushes. We thawed them in our mouths. It was as though something, somewhere wanted us to like it here.”

Remember, Vonnegut was an atheist. He had no defined concept of God. And yet he could still describe a transcendent moment in his life when, as he put it, “It was as though something, somewhere wanted us to like it here.” To encounter such moments of blessing and awe, even if no words are spoken at all, is to experience a prayer of Wow.

To wrap up now, I’m going to give Anne Lamott the last word:

“You’ve heard it said that when all else fails, follow instructions. So we breathe, try to slow down and pay attention, try to love and help God’s other children, and hardest of all, at least to me—learn to love our depressing, hilarious, mostly decent selves. We get thirsty people water, read to the very young and old, and listen to the sad. We pick up litter and try to leave the world a slightly better place for our stay here.

“Those are the basic instructions, to which I can only add: Amen.”

And to Ms. Lamott’s “Amen” I can only add my own.

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