

PROBLEMS WITH PRAYER
February 24, 2013
First Unitarian Church of Saint Louis, MO
©2013 Rev. Thomas Perchlik

READING Excerpt from *Simply Pray: A Modern Spiritual Practice to Deepen Your Life*, by Rev. Eric Walker Wikstrom

“Why do people pray? What does it bring to spirituality? Is there a “someone” or “something” that we encounter in our times of prayer, a “sacred something that is yearning for relationship with us? Is prayer, as Anthony Bloom says, the building of a relationship, [or is it] simply an internal monologue with one’s own subconscious mind?

...We want to know with whom we are engaging –or whether or not there is a “whom”- before we will engage. Yet, to paraphrase Episcopal priest Martin Bell, “You cannot engage the sacred and then commit; commitment is the one and only way of engaging the sacred.” To use another example, you can’t find out what “wet” feels like unless you get into the water... No words can truly describe [prayer] you must experience it for yourself.

This is not the approach most people associate with “religion”. Instead, after having been given a lot of concepts... people are often invited to fit their experiences into prefabricated cubby holes. “This is what God is,” they are told “now go and find him”... For a lot of us, this doesn’t work too well – At some point we get stuck in the concepts, unable to see beyond them, so we find nothing.

SERMON

You may have heard the saying, inspired by Christian Scripture (1 Thessalonians 5:17), “Pray without ceasing and when necessary use words”. Thought I like the sentiment, I assert that prayer is made of words. A couple of weeks back I spoke on ‘meditation,’ which I define as centering and calming of the mind. Meditation often is wordless or the use of words that lead beyond themselves to that which is ineffable, or beyond words. On the other hand, prayer for me is all about the words. More importantly a good prayer is one that opens the mind to what is most holy, to what is most good, and to the deepest foundation of our souls.

Sadly, most people reduce prayer to mere “asking”. The root of the word ‘prayer’ is Latin for ‘entreaty’ or ‘plea’. One problem with asking for things in prayer is that many people ask for silly things. Someone once told me they heard a Christian radio talk show host saying that she prayed for a cable guy to arrive early, and he did. This was proof for her of God’s power, yet somehow prayers for World Peace, or a child’s healing, go unanswered. This is a problem, or should be.

But there is a deeper problem with prayer as a form of asking for what we want. The author, Mark Twain wrote a great short story about this, “The War Prayer”. In it, a congregation is

praying for the victory of their soldiers. An angel of God, or a crazy old man depending on your point of view, comes up into the pulpit to tell the congregation that God has heard their prayer but wants to be sure they know what they are asking. The key line in this story is: "If you beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! Lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time."

Then there is my favorite story about prayer. There is an evangelist, who has a guest in his pulpit one week and so he takes that Sunday off to go hunting in the wilds of Missouri. He comes upon a large, brown, and hungry bear that begins to chase him. The preacher climbs a tree, but is in danger as the bear begins pushing the tree over. So, he prays, "Oh Lord, save me in my distress and make this bear a Christian." At that moment, the bear shakes his head. Then it steps back, looks about and drops to its knees. Putting two paws together the bear prays, "Dear Lord Jesus, please bless this meal I am about to receive"

Beyond the problem of being careful about what to ask for, the fact is that prayer should be more of an opening to conversation than a one way monologue. That leads us to the second problem; what is the relationship of God to prayer, and can only theists pray? The old joke is that all Unitarians begin their prayers "To Whom It May Concern." Though some of us are comfortable with God as a person, some of us are ambivalent, agnostic, or atheistic. As Eric Wikstrom notes, the question of "to whom am I praying?" becomes a stumbling block. And not just to *whom*, since many of us have no personal sense of God as a person. I have long chosen a Buddhist style of meditation as my grounding practice, in part because it requires no mention of God, or any other complicated theological ideas. I want simply to open my mind to ultimate reality as it is. The Dao-de-Jing says: "The name that can be spoken is not the eternal Name, the way that can be told is not the eternal Way. Named, it is the beginning of ten thousand things; Nameless, it is the beginning of heaven and earth." However, over time I have been asked to pray in words, to write prayers and to find words that might not only be meaningful but also vitally powerful. I have struggled with the deep theism in our Unitarian tradition.

Theodore Parker, for example, in the 1800s prayed to "Our Mother-Father God". He was certain that God might transcend gender, but was a certainly a person. In more recent history, you may know that Martin Luther King Junior had studied with Unitarians and visited Unitarian worship. When I was studying for Martin Luther King Junior Day this year I learned that King's Doctoral dissertation, written just as he was called to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, rejects the thinking of a Unitarian theologian, Henry Nelson Wiemann, and of the Protestant thinker Paul Tillich. He did so, on 'personalist' grounds, saying that God had to be a person in order to be in relationship with us, and these two men described God more as a force or process rather than as a person. Martin King chose not to follow a Unitarian path in small part because its God at that time seemed too impersonal.

In his book *Simply Pray*, My U.U. colleague, Reverend Wikstrom notes that he too had struggled with this dilemma in praying, wondering if there was anything to which he honestly could address his prayers and if so, what it was. The solution he found was in simply "getting wet" as it were. In simply praying he found that it did not matter to what or whom. What

mattered was that his words express the relatedness between his innermost self and the truth that is beyond around and within that self. He notes that prayer can come in many forms, Christian, Buddhist, and neo-Pagan. Rather than let prayer be proscribed and limited, he opens it up.

He also usefully describes four types of prayer: Naming, Knowing, Listening, and Loving. The naming prayers are those that name the good and the holy. The most simple of these are mere statements of what we are glad of, or what we are thankful for. Eric also notes in this category the prayers of the Baha'i that are merely long lists of names of God; merciful, gracious, powerful, loving and such. Knowing prayers are those that speak of understanding of our selves, especially of our limits and shortsightedness and failures and to accept our wholeness. Listening prayers are contemplative or meditative, seeking to hear our deeper selves to listen for the fuller truths. Finally, Wikstrom's Loving prayers are those that speak for healing, for peace, for hope or strength. Sometimes just stating our desire can help summon the courage we need to do what must be done. Sometimes speaking our desire for Peace helps us see where and when it appears around and within us.

Another problem I have with prayer is that it is linked to misuse of power and conformity in society. You may know that prayer has long been part of education. Five hundred years ago the only educated people were either monks or religiously devout people. But in those times the culture was different. In this nation, as we developed our public school systems, Jews and Catholics began to be troubled by the sense that their children were being inculcated in Protestant worship. Sometimes protests over the relationship between religion and schools became violent. But their complaints had little effect. Then in the mid-Twentieth century, at the high point in the growth of secularism, two cases came before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1962 and 1963. The first, *Engle V. Vitale*, concerned a prayer written for daily use in New Hyde Park schools, New York State. The prayer to be said by all students each day was:

"Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country. Amen"

When I first read this prayer, I agreed it should have been banished because it was so bland and thus detrimental to the practice of any deep and compelling faith. It was rejected by the Supreme Court on the grounds of religious liberty and First Amendment rights.

A second case also was also then climbing in the U.S. Court system, *Abington School District v. Schempp*. You should know that Edward Schempp was a Unitarian Universalist from Pennsylvania. He argued that the Bible Readings in his school district promoted a liberalistic interpretation of the Bible which was contrary to the religious beliefs which his family held and thus it undermined his family's teachings and restricted his freedom from government infringement on religion. He also noted that he had considered the option of getting his children excused from the exercise, but he knew that would have been detrimental to his children's relationship with their teachers and fellow students. The Court sided with Ed Schempp on the grounds of freedom of religious practice from government interference.

I have actually had to convince misinformed people that the court did not make it illegal to pray in schools. I met one person who genuinely thought they could be arrested for praying in a school. In fact, the only thing this ruling banned was when a government employee, charged with providing education to children, uses that position to shape their religious lives as well.

Of course, it is not just a misuse of authority here. There is a problem if the only prayers you ever hear are public ones. Prayer should be a speaking of the soul, an opening of the self to a dialogue between mystery and understanding, hope and truth. Far too often clergy and their prayers are used to give a patina of solemnity to an event or to fulfill a cultural habit, and thus fail to nurture real faith. Many prayers are merely opportunities to reinforcing the influence of clergy to invoke a pious unity that masks true difference of opinion.

For example, in May of 1999 I was asked to give the “Invocation” and the “Benediction” at the graduation ceremonies of Texas Tech University. One of our fellow UUs was on the program committee and pushed for my inclusion. I was a little concerned about what I would do, but I accepted the challenge, and the chance for Unitarianism to be briefly visible to over ten thousand people at once. Then, I found out that the keynote speaker was to be Governor George W. Bush. This was a month before he announced his candidacy for the U.S. Presidency. The prayer I choose to open the ceremonies was addressed to “The Most Holy Spirit of Life” and was mostly a prayer of thanksgiving. The massive sound of ten thousand people rising to their feet and bowing their heads as I stepped to the lectern put me off of my usual preamble to prayer. I liked my line, “Thank you for the true-blue dream of the sky, and the clouds that cross it like tireless dogs.” It was a poetic evocation of West Texas. Before the ceremonies began, for about ten minutes, I sat in a room alone with Mr. Bush and the Chancellor of the University. We chatted about living in Texas. Then George Bush said to me “You are going to like my speech.” I began to wonder if he knew anything about Unitarian Universalists, so I asked him why I would like it. He replied “I’ll just save that for the speech, but I know you are going to like it.” It turned out this was when he first began to talk about government partnerships with “faith based” organizations. One main point of his speech was to say, “What America needs is more religion.” That is what he thought I would like. Well, I like the idea of getting more just, reasonable and compassionate religion. However, during that speech, and during the ceremonies that followed I heavily rewrote the benediction in my head. By the time I was called forward Mr. Bush had left the stage. Still, I resolutely prayed to the “Most Holy God” to help us form a nation that protected even the most poor and vulnerable, and to help us be “wary of those who spoke of religion but did not do its works.”

Of course, you might like that prayer if you like my politics. The point here is, given the chance, I did exactly what many politically conservative ministers have done: I used my religious position to sanctify my own political opinions. The best prayer should give us courage, but also awaken our humility, temper our arrogance and challenge our compassion. Prayer can name the divine, give shape and name to what is ultimately real, but also awaken us to how limited our knowledge is. Prayer at its best uses words to open mind and heart into relationship with what is most holy, what is most good, and what is the deepest foundation of our souls. I encourage you to develop prayers that are meaningful and courageous, and I shall seek to do the same.