

«Is Anybody Listening? – Perspectives on Prayer»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, March 29, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

I have to confess – I pray. I am a praying woman. An odd thing, that a preacher feels the need to confess to praying, but in our denomination, I recognize some ambivalence about prayer. Many Unitarian Universalists are skeptical about the idea of prayer, for we have said that reason must not be set aside for comforting superstitions. This is a courageous stance, and perhaps I am not that courageous, because I yearn to be connected with that Mystery some call god, some call nature or spirit, and this sense of connection that I yearn for, that is able to move me out of a feeling that my life is made up of fragments instead of being of one piece, this yearning is not something I can explain through reason. And when I feel that connection I yearn for, it is more than comforting superstition. The essence of prayer is the desire for that connection, for a relationship that makes us feel whole. Oddly, prayer is not something we discussed at Meadville Lombard Theological School. Spiritual practice, yes, meditation, yes, but not prayer. Somehow talking about prayer seems dangerously pious, God-fearing, developed within a particular religious context that many of us do not share. And so it feels not quite right to engage in it.

I believe prayer is a topic that has been made too complicated, too prescribed – I currently have three books on my bookshelves about prayer that were assigned to me the year I was at Duke Divinity School. And I think many of us as Unitarian Universalists remain ambivalent about prayer because of the attitudes and misconceptions we have about it – the way we've seen prayer misused, used to manipulate people perhaps, or to manipulate situations. I've tried to use that technique myself on occasion. I used the technique a lot when I had my '94 Acura, because for the last couple of years I owned it, it seemed to have a mind of its own about when and if it would start. So I would often get in my car and pray that it would start. And is this not just the type of prayer that makes us liberal religious people fairly crazy? This concept that prayer can be used to bring a deity to rescue us from a predicament we've gotten ourselves into, without us being willing to take the steps to change ourselves or our situation, like buy a new car? Whoever or whatever god is, she is not a heavenly ATM machine, where we can insert a prayer and get back what we've asked for.

There are two myths about prayer that I grew up with that I've had to let go of over the years. The first is that prayer is used to bring about a specific result. I no longer believe I am wise enough to know how the Spirit should move in my life. I've had people tell me, thank you for praying for me, but it didn't work. They were expecting a particular response. I remember reading a couple of years ago about a study that was done at a major hospital in our area, just down the road, not in Chapel Hill, by the way, in which intercessory prayer – that's prayer said by one person for another person – was used for some patients and not others, and their clinical outcomes compared. The results showed, the article said, that intercessory prayer had no benefit. Then, toward the end of the article there was a rather offhand remark that the patients who had been prayed for did seem to have reduced stress levels during their hospital stay, and in fact had shorted

hospital stays. But since these were not the parameters being studied, the researches concluded that prayer had no affect on these patients. The researchers were expecting a particular response.

Prayer is not about getting a specific result. It's an intentional opening up to the Sacred in our lives. Paul Tillich called it, "bringing one's own personal center before God." It is a setting aside of time for acute awareness, for being in touch with the deepest, most honest desires of the heart, often with results that could not have been foreseen, but which are much richer than we would have expected. Prayer, as I understand it and experience it, is conversation. And whether I call it prayer or meditation really depends on whether I'm in a state of talking or listening. When I'm expressing my thoughts, feelings, pain, joy, I call it prayer. And when I'm stilling myself to just be aware, listening, I call it meditation. As conversation, prayer becomes deeply personal, reflecting not only who we are, at our deepest level, but also our sense of who or what that relationship is with, what that relationship looks and feels like, and so prayer also has a theological component.

Which brings me to the second myth I've had to unlearn. And that is that we have to use a particular language to pray, that we have to have some sort of systematic theology worked out before we can pray, that we have to know what the Holy *is* before we can pray. One of the things that gets us tangled up about prayer are ideas we learned about what kinds of words or language we should use, words or language that may not feel theologically honest to us. There have been many times in my life that using the term "prayer" for this "conversation" felt uncomfortable, because it conjured up an image of the bearded sugar-daddy in the sky, and so I didn't use it. I simply thought of it as opening up space for the silence to speak. Language for any spiritual practice, if it is used at all, needs to come from your center. It needs to feel authentic. You need to own it.

When I was a little girl, I remember a particular Sunday school teacher who encouraged us to recite the Lord's Prayer each night before we went to sleep, which I dutifully did, I think at least for that entire school year. It's the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray, and in English it's been interpreted as beginning with, "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." This address to the prayer has been the site of steamy debate. For many Christians Jesus' use of the image of Father was the first proof that he was the true son of God, since nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures is the word "Father" used to begin prayer. It has been problematic for Christians whose earthly paternal relationships have been hurtful. It has been used to identify the Holy in only masculine terms.

For many reasons, then, the prayer was one of those childish things I put behind me, until my first year at Duke Divinity School, when I was required to take a course called the Theology of the Lord's Prayer. At the same time, I was taking a course on the Old Testament, being steeped in the words of the Hebrew prophets and sages, and so in studying this prayer I heard it, not as a Christian, but as one of a group of Jewish men who were asking Jesus how to pray, might have heard and understood it. I don't think this was Duke's intention, by the way, but this is what happened. This address that Jesus uses is particularly intriguing. In Aramaic, Jesus' native language, he most likely would have begun the prayer with, *Abwoon d'bwashmaya*. Translated, Our father which art in heaven. For Jesus to use this image as a metaphor for God was a radical

move. It astonished his disciples, because he was suggesting a much more intimate relationship with the Sacred than had ever been voiced before. Notice that he says, “Our Father” and not “My Father.” He draws everyone into this circle of intimacy. I believe that the most important thing about this part of the address is this invitation to intimacy, not the particular word or image used to portray that intimacy.

But then Jesus adds, “*Nethqadash shmakh.*” Hallowed be thy name. In the Hebrew tradition, a thing is hallowed by clearing or preparing a space for it. In the Hebrew tradition, God’s name was too holy to be said aloud, and so four consonants – YHWH – were used in their writings as place-keepers for the name of the holy. We often interpret these four consonants as Yahweh, which really obliterates their original purpose of not being pronounceable. To the ancient Hebrews, to name something was to know its very essence, and they were wise enough to know that the essence of the Holy could not be grasped completely, and so could not be named. To hallow a name – to preserve a place for it without uttering it – was to recognize that the Holy is finally beyond all our knowing.

So when Jesus instructed his disciples to pray in this way, he uses this address as a paradox, two phrases that stand in purposeful tension with one another, calling our attention to prayer-as-conversation with something that is both intimate and unknowable, calling us to recognize that any name we use for the Holy can only be a metaphor for how we experience that relationship.

When my son Russ was four years old, he attended pre-school at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Orlando, and one day he came home and announced that they had learned the second commandment. In the second commandment Moses warns the people that they are not to make graven images. Russ said, “and God said, thou shalt not be craving images!” I can’t think of a more apt interpretation of that commandment. We attach ourselves to images of the Holy like barnacles on a ship. And when we insist that God is male, we create an image, and we break this commandment. When we believe that the Holy must exist as a Trinity, forgetting that the trinity is simply a metaphor for the different aspects of the Holy, we break this commandment. If we could just loosen our attachment to these images, we might be able to relax into the many ways that the Sacred chooses to reveal herself in our lives. We might be able to relax enough to create an intimate space for that unknowable Presence. “Mother, Father, hallowed be your name.” And then what? And then we can express anger, resentment, confusion, joy. Prayer is the one place I don’t have to censor my innermost feelings. I can say, please start my car, and then in the next breath say, that was stupid, what I need is a clear head to help me figure out how to start this thing myself.

One more story about how prayer is sometimes answered. I remember my years just prior to seminary as quite confusing, filled with self-doubt, feeling a need to move in a new direction with my professional life. I’ve been an avid journaler for years now, I consider journaling a form of prayer, and at that time I wrote a lot about feeling the need for change. Professional ministry kept coming up in my journal entries and so I applied to seminary. One Sunday morning I wrote, “this idea of ministry feels like such a good fit except for one thing: it feels crazy to start something like this at my age, when I may not have many years of ministry left by the time I finish school.” That’s what I wrote. Then I went to church, at Eno River where I’m a member, and during joys

and concerns I told the congregation that I'd been accepted into Duke's divinity school and would start in the fall. That's all I shared. After the service a couple came up to me and said that what I had shared reminded them of a friend of theirs who had gone through seminary and how much it meant to him. As they walked away, I called out and asked, where is he doing ministry now? The woman turned back and said, "Oh, it was so sad, he died of AIDS shortly after he graduated." And then she added, "He taught us all an important lesson, that it's not how much time you have but what you do with it that matters."

I can't begin to explain or judge how the Spirit works in this world. But I recognize and trust that it does. Often the answers to my prayers are not this straightforward. More often it manifests as a subtle but clearer sense of direction. Or I pray for someone in need and I get a sense of how I can help. Or I pray for someone I'm angry with and my heart softens, bringing me closer to a place of forgiveness. Some might ask, with all the suffering going on in this world, what can praying do? I would argue that prayer is not a passive activity. On the contrary, it is active, an act that opens us up to be vulnerable to change. A first step in right action. It may be as simple as stopping in the midst of your day to say, "I'm listening." "Thank you." "I am so confused." "I'm available." The desert fathers in the early centuries of Christianity believed that if we could be completely mindful at every moment of our lives, there would be no difference between prayer and life. Since this is impossible, we set aside time to be mindful, to be attentive to that Presence. To take the deep breath. Mary Oliver writes in her poem, "The Summer Day" – "I don't know what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass." Perhaps seen in this way, we are in a state of prayer more times than we realize.

To the question, "Is anybody listening when I pray?" I have to say, yes. To the more specific questions of who, or why, or how, I have to say, I don't know. My best advice is this: find your own way into prayer, and in trusting that willingness to be heard, you will be heard. Amen, and blessed be.