

PRAYER'S GIFTS

A Sermon by Barbara ten Hove

— Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD —

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Call to Worship

When people come to a religious service of worship, we are following in the footsteps of our forebears. While there is no way of knowing exactly what these people believed about the Holy, ancient pictures and texts seem to imply that human beings have always tried to connect to the mystery beyond all seeing, which some call God. Worship, ritual and prayer, it seems, are hard-wired in the human spirit.

Our religious tradition has often questioned the reality of things we can't see. We are a practical people who know that belief about mystery often matters a lot less than concrete choices we make in the here and now. Yet, our faith does acknowledge this truth: our approach to the mystery and wonder that live in our hearts does impact our every day choices in significant ways. In other words, if we are going to try to connect in a deep way to the Holy, we had better pay attention to how and when we do that, because it matters.

Today's service will explore a variety of types of prayer to see if they can be meaningful to us. And we're going to begin with song. Music is also an ancient art and it is used, in some fashion, in every culture and religion. Within our own tradition, we have often focused less on the experience of making music than on the value of listening to it. But more and more we are coming to realize that the act of making music together can be profoundly religious. So let's make some music. Let's enter into prayer with a song [by Sarah Dan Jones, in *Singing the Journey*].

When I breathe in, I breathe in peace.

When I breathe out, I breathe out love.

Sermon: Prayer's Gifts

(Barbara W. ten Hove, 8/6/06)

The first time I remember praying as if I really meant it was in 1969. I was nine years old and my second sister was a college freshman. She was on her way home from school but had not arrived yet. In fact, she was very late. In our family (and even at age nine I knew this), we were not allowed to be late. My dad always told us that we were never AWOL

(absent without leave) as far as the nearest telephone—and this was long before cell phones! And yet my sister had not called.

I was a serious child at age nine and her absence made me worry. And worry and worry. (I was once told that “Worrying is praying for what you don’t want”—quite true in this case!) Finally, I remember going into the hall by the phone and praying as hard as I could that she was all right. Within minutes of my heartfelt prayer, the phone rang and she checked in from the road where she had been stuck in a major traffic jam.

From that moment, I began to believe that prayer makes a difference. While I don’t believe that prayer saved my sister’s life, I do believe it helped me to focus positively in ways that allowed me to have more trust and hope. Though my views of God and prayer have matured since I was nine, I continue to believe that prayer has meaning and value in my life and in the world around me.

Now many of you know that I was raised Unitarian Universalist. So it may surprise you to learn how important prayer is to me. But prayer has always been a part of our UU faith. In the early days of both Unitarianism and Universalism, the Lord’s Prayer was prayed regularly in our congregations. It still is in some New England churches.

And I would guess that the majority of congregations in our denomination use prayer in some way in most Sunday services. Sometimes it’s called meditation. Sometimes it’s a time of silence. Sometimes it’s a special reading or song (like *Spirit of Life* by Carolyn McDade, a prayer set to music that we sing each week here at Paint Branch). And sometimes it *is* called a prayer. So despite what you may think, prayer is quite common within our congregations and among our people.

Yet, prayer can also be quite controversial. Some of you may recall the very first time Jaco and I led a service here at Paint Branch, while we were interviewing for the position of co-minister. I did that Sunday morning what I have done in every church I have ever been a part of or ever served. I prayed. Out loud. In church. I did not know that this would be surprising or difficult to anyone. But it was.

Later that week, someone sat with us and told me that I could not be a UU if I prayed. I have to say that this was one of the most hurtful moments in my professional life. But it was also a great learning experience for me. Because it hurt so much to be told that UUism could not include prayer, it forced me to ask myself why prayer matters—to me and to our faith. And over the past seven years I have continued to think and to ponder

and, yes, to pray over this question. Why prayer? Why does it matter? What does it do? Who does it impact? Where does it go? What are its gifts?

And during these seven years of ministry at Paint Branch, both Jaco (my husband and co-minister) and I have tried to find places to use prayer in our ministry in ways that work for different kinds of people: those who pray easily and naturally, those who struggle to pray, those who don't pray but who do understand the power of meditation and deep internal listening, and those for whom prayer is not meaningful in any way. And I think we have opened a door that has allowed us, as a religious community, to talk openly about prayer in ways we found hard before.

So, I suppose I should not have been astonished when nearly a dozen people signed up to take the *Prayer for Beginners* class I taught last April. I offered this class for two reasons. First, I was curious if we had come to a place where exploring prayer would be an acceptable path for Paint Branchers to take.

And second, since I am preparing to teach a course for ministry students on the topic of worship, I wanted to try out some exercises and teaching techniques. I really did not think many people would sign up. I figured I'd have two or three stalwart souls in my office. Instead, we filled our room to the brim. As I gazed in wonder on this group, I said a small prayer: *May this time together be as meaningful for them as it already is for me.*

That first class took many hours of preparation and angst to prepare. As the night approached, I wrestled mightily with the topic. How could I teach something as personal and as challenging as prayer? I was not taught to pray in seminary. I learned from experiencing it early in my life. I grew up in a house where prayer was a regular part of our daily life. My father always made up a prayer for our grace at dinner, and he would bring both humor and meaning to that brief time of giving thanks before our meal. As we held hands around the table, I felt the deep connection that his prayer always aroused in me.

And I learned that prayer could take many forms. His spontaneous prayer was quite different than the one we said at bedtime—a ritual we repeated each night in the quiet darkness of our room, one parent always with us helping us to remember the blessings of our family and friends.

And our bedtime prayer differed greatly from the sung and spoken prayers we did at our Unitarian congregations, first in Virginia and then New England. Because I saw so many

ways of praying as a child, I knew that there was not one way to pray. And as a UU, I know that so much of our strength lies in our diversity. Thus I brought to this *Prayer for Beginners* class a deep and abiding belief that prayer could and should take many forms.

This was confirmed for me in some research I did prior to the class. I read a wonderful book called *Prayer: a History* (by Philip and Carol Zaleski). Their book reminded me that prayer is a potent player in the history of humankind. They tie the concept of prayer to ritual, and show how the two have moved together through human history. In the first chapter in this fascinating study, they write:

Which came first? Did humans discover prayer and then develop ritual as a means to tame its energies, creating well-worn furrows for the masses to follow? Or did ritual come first and give birth to prayer, in a way that speech gives birth to thought? [p. 10]

They then try to answer their own question:

This much is clear: to participate in ritual is to enter the world of prayer, and to make a habit of prayer is to open the door to ritual. [p. 10]

For many of us who were raised in religious homes, prayer and ritual were completely intertwined, sometimes in positive and sometimes less than positive ways. The prayers that are said before communion, for example, in some churches (primarily those we call “high church,” such as Roman Catholic and Episcopal) are deeply tied to that important sharing ritual.

In other churches, prayers said during an altar call can add to that experience greatly. In Judaism, the prayer over the candles at the beginning of the Sabbath beautifully uses movement and song to deepen the moment. And in many, many cultures and religious traditions, the use of prayer beads, bells, drums, even knotted cords make the prayer, through ritual, a tangible experience.

I am a firm believer in the power of ritual. It is why I love worship so much. Worship, even in our flexible and liberal faith, is almost always ritualistic to some degree. With the order of service as our guide, we walk together through this ritual each week. And within its order are smaller rituals such as the lighting of the chalice, the sharing of joys and sorrows, and even the taking up of the offering! Ritual, like prayer, seems to live deep in the human spirit.

Children remind us of this. They naturally do ritual, don't they? How many three-year-olds have you known who insist on doing things a certain way and have a fit if the pattern changes? Ritual. And children also teach us about prayer. They seem comfortable from an early age saying the most simple of prayers. Even children (like many of ours) who are not raised with traditional religious language will often find ways to pray. I have heard children say, "Thank you, World!" and "Monster, please go away." These are simple but real prayers.

But even as the tendency to create rituals and to pray seem to exist in us from a very young age, prayer *can* be taught. I learned to pray from my parents. But many Unitarian Universalists are never taught to pray or learned rote prayers that became meaningless to them as adults. My challenge, particularly as I prepare to teach seminary students, was to determine if I could figure out a way to teach prayer.

To do this, I had to first define it. What is prayer, anyway? The authors of *Prayer: a History* define it simply:

Prayer is action that communicates between human and divine realms. [p. 5]

While this is a perfectly acceptable definition of prayer, it did not work for me because I can't separate the divine from the human realms so easily. In my theology, the two are entirely intertwined.

So I went looking for definitions. A UU colleague of mine says prayer is "the need to reach out beyond ourselves in thought and word" [L. Annie Foerster in *For Praying Out Loud*]. Better, but still not exactly what I wanted.

Another UU colleague, speaking to children says, "When I ask someone to pray for me I am asking to be held close in their hearts, in that very special place where love lies" [in *uu & me!* Winter, 2006].

I like this definition because it speaks of the inward kind of prayer, a good counterpoint to the other definition of reaching out. But I still wanted something more. So I decided to write my own definition. Here it is:

Prayer is an act we intentionally do, as spiritual beings, to connect us to the Holy (by whatever name we call it), to each other, and to all creation.

Let me unpack this a little by looking at each section of this definition. **Prayer is an intentional act.** In other words, when we pray we are choosing to focus our hearts and minds (and sometimes even our bodies) toward something. Prayer is something we do. As the authors of *Earth Prayers* [Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon] wrote: “The moment of prayer is always an event. Something happens.”

Moving on. *Prayer is an act we intentionally do, as spiritual beings.* I believe that all people are spiritual beings. I believe, with our Unitarian forebear William Ellery Channing, that each of us has a spark of the divine in us. If God is anything, the spirit that is God lives in creation and that means in each of us.

And that’s why I say *prayer is an act we intentionally do, as spiritual beings, to connect us to the Holy (by whatever name we call it).* Prayer is a way for us to move both inwardly and outwardly toward the good. It is a way for us to focus our energies toward something larger than ourselves. It may be understood as God, as goddess, as love, as community or as creation—but prayer takes us both outside *and* deep inside our spirits.

Prayer is an act we intentionally do, as spiritual beings, to connect us to the Holy (by whatever name we call it) and to each other. Prayer is one of the best ways we can show our care and love for each other. When we think deeply about someone who is hurting or in need of love, our thoughts have the potential to manifest themselves in healing and hope. When people of other faiths ask if they can pray for me or for people in this church I always say yes. (As long as the prayer is not about converting us!) Some studies suggest that prayer does make a difference. And it certainly can’t hurt!

Finally, *prayer is an act we intentionally do, as spiritual beings, to connect us to the Holy (by whatever name we call it), to each other and to all creation.* I owe this last phrase to my *Prayer for Beginners* class. When I gave them my original definition someone rightly said that prayer can also connect us to the natural world around us. How very true!

One of the most beautiful things ever said about this comes from the writer Annie Dillard. She tells the story of a blind girl who regains her sight and sees what she calls “the tree with the lights in it.” Annie Dillard longs to see this tree and looks for it everywhere. One day she was walking, thinking of nothing, when, and here I will quote her:

I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar ...charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it,

grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance
[From *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*].

I felt such a thing once, when I came upon a vista in the Blue Ridge Mountains as a child and knew in that moment (that lasted only a second or perhaps an eternity) that this beautiful creation and I were one. I think it was a prayer. I know that all I could do in response to it was pray.

But ultimately, prayer is something that is mysterious. How and what we pray, even in groups, comes from our own individual spirits. So truly, the only way to really learn how to pray is to pray. So that is what I will do with you for most of the rest of this service.

Let me start with a simple prayer that I used in our class. At the first session, I chose to begin with what I consider to be a very basic prayer—giving thanks. So I invite you to try this simple prayer with me. Think of someone in your life that you are particularly thankful for. It may be a family member or a friend. It may even be someone with whom you are struggling. Whoever it is, hold them in your thoughts.

Now begin breathing slowly. Following on the techniques of meditation used by the Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh, I suggest you breathe in and out with these thoughts. On the in breath say, “I give thanks for [this person] in my life.” On the out breath, “May [they] be blessed with love.” Try this with me for a few moments...

If you are like the people in my class, you may find yourself surprised by how the simple act of giving thanks and offering a blessing can feel. Some in the class felt as if they were surrounded by love. Others felt a sense of deep connection to the one for whom they were praying. Quite interesting were the few who found themselves giving thanks for someone with whom they were angry. This simple prayer began the process of letting go of that anger. And a small movement toward healing began.

We did a few other exercises but the next one I want to share with you is what I gave them for homework. While I tend to be someone who usually prays without a script, I know that for many the craft of writing a prayer can be very meaningful. As I thought about the seminarians I will teach, it felt even more critical that I give folks the opportunity to actually write a prayer that could be read. So I gave them a form, a template, to follow:

Name the Holy: (God, Spirit, Friend, Mystery, etc.)

Give Thanks

Ask Forgiveness

Acknowledge Your Need

Ask for Help

End the Prayer

It was fascinating to me to hear how people approached this homework. Some found it surprisingly easy. Others took all week to think about it but still could not put pen to paper. But most found the process meaningful. Let me share with you the prayer I offered them as an example. (Remember, this was written in early spring.)

O Mother of Creation!

For the pink and fragile blossoms of spring, I give thanks abundantly.

How sorry I am that in my infernal busy-ness I almost missed their glorious beauty.

I hunger for the breath of spring and even in this moment feel the first warm wind approaching.

Can I, too, grow like the spring, and forsake my winter ways?

Can I, too, blossom like the cherry tree and not fear the wind that changes me from flower to fruit?

I know I must. I pray I will. Amen.

I would invite you to use this template to write your own prayer someday. If you do so, and you're willing, please share it with me. I'd love to experience your prayers.

Finally, I will take us through a process that I hope will be both familiar and different. Most Sundays at Paint Branch, we do what we call "sharing of joys and sorrows." This process is deeply significant to many of us, for it is a time for us to bring our hurts, our joys, our sorrows and our accomplishments into community. We always end this sharing by lighting a candle for the unspoken things held in our hearts. We often end the sharing with a prayer or some kind of silent reflection.

Today, this process will take a slightly different form, in keeping with our topic. During the second session of our prayer class, I invited the participants to do what we called a "healing prayer." And this healing prayer is how we will do our sharing today.

I will begin by asking Jaco to give us a musical underpinning for this prayer. Music has a way of deepening prayer. I look at it like a vehicle on which prayer rides. Music allows the prayer to enter into our hearts quickly and deeply. *[Soft music begins.]*

Now I would invite all of us (if you choose – all of this is optional!) to start praying silently, “I pray for hope and healing.”

Now I invite you to call to mind a person who particularly needs prayers for hope and healing. Let the face of that person enter into your mind and heart. Then, if you choose, I invite you to say, into the space of this room, the name of the person you are praying for and a brief word or phrase about their need. For example: “[Someone], in the hospital.”

Please feel free now to speak into this sacred space the names of those you wish to pray for. [*The congregation offers names aloud.*]

May those for whom we pray today find hope and healing. And may we also know the blessings of this loving community as we move through our day. Amen and Blessed Be.

As you can see, prayer can have a marvelous power to help us care for others, and to spread that care beyond our own skin. I would invite you if you choose to explore the power of prayer in your own life. Even the simplest word of thanks and the smallest moment of connection can be a prayer.

Closing Words

Prayer of Petition (When You Don't Know What You Want or Need.)

[By L. Annie Foerster in *For Praying Out Loud*, Skinner House Books]

Spirit of Ages, Light of Life, What can we tell you that is not already known?

What can we ask for that will not come without the asking?

And, still we speak—to tell, to ask, to pray.

We would tell of our triumphs, in order to drown out the shout of our defeats;

We would tell of our love, in order to still the fear that we are unloved;

And we would tell of our lives, as if to live forever.

We would ask for wisdom, and will settle for the courage to do what we must;

We would ask for joy, and will be grateful for the ability to cry;

And we would ask for one another's continued presence, and will be content with memories and dreams.

Thus we tell; thus we ask; thus we pray:

Giving thanks for all that has been, accepting what is,

Yearning with hope and determination for what will be.

Amen.