

About Prayer

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The Reverend Heather K. Janules
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
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Reading

“Something About Prayer” by Gordon Atkinson

“What’s the weirdest thing I ever prayed for in church? A hermit crab.

A little girl raised her hand and asked if the whole congregation would pray for her sick hermit crab. I don’t remember exactly what was wrong with this crab. I don’t know how you determine that a hermit crab is sick in the first place. She seemed pretty sure he was sick, so we took her at her word.

Among those who bowed their heads that day was Roy, whose father died when he was nine. This was back in the Great Depression. His mother was left alone to scratch out an existence for herself and her two small boys there in the flatlands of the Texas Panhandle.

Chris was there that morning, too. Her father abused her for years and years, and no one in her family ever came to her rescue. As I recall, she used to sit in church when she was a little girl and pray that he would stop. I sneaked a glance at Chris and saw her head go down.

There were others with similar stories. The room was full of people who had seen plenty of hard times in their lives and done plenty of praying.

It’s funny how a preacher’s mind can wander, right in the middle of a sermon or even just before a prayer. I couldn’t help but think of Julie, the little girl I prayed for years ago. She was five years old and had...cancer. I prayed first that she would be healed and later that she would die in peace. The silence was deafening. After she died in great pain, I said to God, “I guess that’s a ‘no’, huh?”

All the heads bowed except mine. I was left standing at the front, wondering how you pray for a hermit crab in the presence of a man who prayed that his daddy would live. How do you pray for a hermit crab while looking at the bowed head of a woman who prayed that her daddy would stop?

And what about Julie, God? Exactly what was going on with that situation?... If letting Julie die in peace was outside your self-imposed limits, what will you do for a hermit crab that we hear is a little under the weather?...

You know what got me started praying? The bowed heads. Roy’s head and Chris’ head. All of them. Rows and rows of bowed heads, waiting expectantly. Toward the back I saw the head of the little girl who asked for this prayer. Her hands were clasped in front of her so seriously. It was a precious sight, and my heart was filled with love for these people... “Maybe prayer,” I thought, “Means a little bit more.”

Here were people who would pray for a crab in church. They loved this little girl, and she felt comfortable enough to share the concerns of her heart. Even in the midst of their own unanswered prayers, they were big enough and small enough to pray with their little friend for her hermit crab.

Suddenly, I wanted to be like these people. I wanted to be praying with them, and I didn't care if it made sense or not. I said to myself, "The [heck] with it. I'm praying for the...crab."

And I did. And it felt good.

When the prayer was over, all the heads came up and no one knew what had happened to me. As far as they knew, a kid had asked for prayer and we had prayed. Business as usual.

But it wasn't business as usual for me. Whatever I was praying for, I got what I needed. And I did not miss the irony either. The one leading the prayer knew less about praying than almost anyone in the room, including the little girl who loved her hermit crab.

That little girl was my daughter, by the way...The crab was named "Pinchy," and he lived in our house all the days of his life. And I am a man who has become a child again.

I tell you, I will pray for just about anything."

Prayer by Lindsay Bates (Adapted)

If prayer worked like magic...I know what I would pray:
Let life be always kind to our children.
Let sorrow not touch them.
Let them be free from fear.
Let them never suffer injustice,
nor the persecutions of the righteous.
Let them not know the pain of failure –
of a project, a love, a hope, or a dream.
Let life be to them gentle and joyful and kind.
If I knew the formula, that's what I'd pray.

But prayer isn't magic, and life will be hard.
So I pray for our children [and all people]
– with some hope for this prayer:
May our knowledge of sorrow be tempered with joy.
May our fear be well-balanced by courage and strength.
May the sight of injustice spur us to just actions.
May our failures be teachers, that our spirits may grow.
May we be gentle and joyful and kind.
Then our lives will be magic, and life will be good.
So may it be...Amen.

Sermon

"About Prayer"

It is said that the author, M. Scott Peck, sold thousands of copies of his book *The Road Less Traveled* because of the first three words on the front page— "Life is difficult."

By stringing together these three simple words, Peck names a profound truth about human experience. Life is difficult. Sometimes our actions or inactions make life more difficult than it needs to be but challenge, sorrow and loss are inherently part of our existence. There may be relief but there is no escape from this reality.

I have been with you as the assistant minister for almost a year now and, in these twelve months, I have witnessed and known enough difficulty to affirm M. Scott Peck's three word treatise. We become ill and lose the ability to live life in the ways we are used to. We lose beloved friends and family members to death. We witness war, chaos and oppression at home and far away—Iraq, Darfur, India. Life is difficult.

So, when I prepared to preach this morning, I thought I might just tell a bunch of jokes instead of preaching a sermon. Goodness knows we need a little break.

But there is a reason why I am a minister and not a comedian so I decided against the “telling a bunch of jokes” plan. Instead, I decided to draw from my time with you in a different way.

Throughout this past year, I have come to know the Cedar Lane community as a people with wildly diverse understandings of religion. We affirm modernity and intellectual innovation in groups like Science and Religion. We seek spiritual enrichment through covenant groups, like Deepening Our Spiritual Perspectives. As named in our denominational covenant, our living tradition is sustained by “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder...which moves us to a renewal of the spirit...” and “humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind...”

Together, we are a faith community that relies on both transcendence and reason. Together, we are a congregation of faithful skeptics and seekers. In this complex way, together we are a church.

There are practices that are expected of a faith community—good works, service, stewardship. People in faith communities also pray. But what does it mean to pray in a place where there is not consensus that there is even a God to hear the prayer? If we pray to an entity that does not exist, does the prayer make a sound?

These questions piqued my own curiosity and so, like Gordon Atkinson, I became inspired to preach “something about prayer.”

Because we live a diverse faith together, I know there are some of you who saw the title of this morning’s sermon and swiftly concluded that you just gained twenty minutes in your morning to day dream because there is no God and because you don’t pray. You may only go on your knees when you drop a contact lens or work in your garden. There may be some of you who believe that “something about prayer” does not relate to your life.

I don’t know for certain if there is a transcendent God and, if She does exist, I don’t know exactly what she is like—angry God, prophetic God, personal God, “still, small voice” God, healing God. I just don’t know. That’s probably why I titled this sermon, “About Prayer” and not “About God.”

But the first thing I know about prayer is that the existence of God is irrelevant. Or, as Gordon Atkinson affirms in his autobiography, “it doesn’t matter in the least that I be convinced of God’s existence. Whether or not God exists is none of my business, really. What do I know of existence? I don’t even know how the VCR works.”

The existence of God is irrelevant because, whether God exists or not, there is still something greater than ourselves. So much of our lives are not up to us, are outside the realm of our control. Regardless of whether there is an organizing force at the wheel, we are, more often than we might like, in the passenger seat.

Not only is the existence of God irrelevant to things “about prayer,” but the existence of God is irrelevant to the whole spiritual enterprise. You may have already heard me affirm the definition of “spirituality” offered by Quaker educator and activist, Parker Palmer. Palmer describes “spirituality” as “engagement with something beyond our own ego.”

This view of spirituality speaks to the truth that whether we believe in an angry God, a personal God, a healing God, the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” a community with whom we “feel comfortable enough to share the concerns of our hearts,” the blessings of the natural world, we believe in a “higher power.”

Reflecting this truth, my friend Woody has a scribbled note on his refrigerator that reads “Woody, the job is taken. (Signed) God” This little note on Woody’s refrigerator is nothing short of a prayer.

The first thing I know about prayer is that the existence of God is irrelevant. The second thing I know about prayer is that what we say in our prayers or how we pray is also irrelevant. I learned this lesson from two very spiritual people, both very angry at God.

Before I entered the ministry, I worked for a social-service agency that supports adults with developmental disabilities. One of the men our agency served was someone we will call “Tom.” Considering the life he endured, we might as well call him “Job.” Along with trying to survive in this world as someone with cognitive impairment, he was the target of physical and sexual abuse in his childhood. Day by day, he struggled with his own impulses to dominate and abuse other people.

Our agency offered art classes to the individuals in the program. Tom flourished with the opportunity to express himself, creating ghoulish line drawings with markers surrounded by angry poems, the letters crowded together, the words running into one another. As part of one particularly intense drawing, Tom wrote, “God, don’t send Jesus this time. This matter cannot be handled by children.”

Tom’s lamentation is nothing short of a prayer.

The other person who taught me that it doesn’t matter how we pray was a patient in Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. I was serving as a student chaplain when the pager went off, telling me that a patient wanted to talk to a minister.

I had been in my internship long enough to become familiar with these visits and anticipated a typical conversation: the patient is somber and subdued, reflecting on their lot in life, symbolized by the whirring machines keeping them alive, the tubes in their arm filling them with medicine. We would talk for awhile and, based on the story I had heard, the patient and I would pray together. We would pray for hope, for healing, for deliverance from a terrible fate. Our prayer would, in some fashion, say to God, “thy will be done.”

But when I arrived in the room, I met a very different patient with a very different prayer. Mary had been admitted for a serious illness but, strangely, she didn’t want to talk about her own health. She demanded that I pray to God, that I pray to God NOW and that I pray for her son.

Mary’s son had struggled with alcoholism and the trials that often come with the disease—a failed marriage, lost jobs, jail time—for most of his adult life. After many attempts to get clean and sober, after he had violated the trust in their relationship for the last time, he finally found his way to recovery and his life began to stabilize. He had his own apartment, he met a woman he hoped to marry. Against all odds, Mary’s son had a chance at life again.

But, as I stood in Mary’s hospital room, her son was far away in Texas, in a hospice center. Just a few months before, he was diagnosed with Stage Four cancer. Her son’s second chance at life was slipping away fast and she was too ill to be at his side. Pardon my language, but Mary was pissed.

We talked for awhile. I shared with Mary that I thought it was okay to speak honestly with God. God could take it. I told Mary that when we pray, the experience is more “giving word to our need” than crafting an eloquent petition that will change things. We pray to reveal the most vulnerable and honest parts of us to all that is greater than ourselves.

And so Mary prayed. Let it suffice to say, that Mary prayed honestly, as I don’t feel comfortable using her words in the pulpit. Mary’s angry challenge to God is nothing short of a prayer.

In summation, this is what I know about prayer:

When I was growing up, my mother taught me to use the words “please” and “thank you” when seeking or receiving something. She described these two words as “magic words” and, over time, I was able to see their magic for myself. If I said “Give me a burrito,” no burrito would appear on my plate. But if I said “Please give me a burrito,” I could not guarantee that a burrito would appear but I had a much better chance of it. For my word “please” acknowledged that creation of my favorite Mexican dish was not up to me. And “thank you” communicated my gratitude that I had the opportunity to enjoy this delicious meal.

For those of you who believe that “something about prayer” does not relate to your life, I say that if you use the words “please” and “thank you,” you already pray. You pray because you acknowledge that there are things you need to survive and thrive that you cannot acquire on your own. When you use the words “please” and “thank you,” you acknowledge that our lives are contingent on the mercy and generosity of other people, Mother Earth, fate. Our very lives are dependent on all that is greater than ourselves.

When you say “please” and “thank you,” you pray because you name “your place in the family of things,” as the poet Mary Oliver might say. Prayer is not about who hears it or the form or content of the prayer. Prayer is about bringing us back to the truth that we are vulnerable to the tides of life. Nothing makes this more clear than a prayer of despair and lamentation: “God, don’t send Jesus this time. This matter cannot be handled by children.”

Through the practice of prayer, we remind ourselves of our humility and the gifts and opportunities that surround us. Prayer doesn’t change God. Prayer changes us.

So, in the words of Ellen Bass, I say:

“Pray to whomever you kneel down to:
Jesus nailed to his wooden or plastic cross,
his suffering face bent to kiss you,
Buddha still under the Bo tree in scorching heat,
Adonai, Allah. Raise your arms to Mary
that she may lay her palm on our brow...

Then pray to the bus driver who takes you to work.
On the bus, pray for everyone riding that bus,
for everyone riding buses all over the world.
Drop some silver and pray.

Waiting in line for the movies, for the ATM,
for your latte and croissant, offer your plea.
Make your eating and drinking a supplication.
Make your slicing of carrots a holy act,
each translucent layer of the onion, a deeper prayer.

To Hawk or Wolf, or the Great Whale, pray.
Bow down to terriers and shepherds and Siamese cats.
Fields of artichokes and elegant strawberries...

Making love, of course, is already prayer.
Skin, and open mouths worshipping that skin,
the fragile cases we are poured into.

If you're hungry, pray. If you're tired.
Pray to Gandhi and Dorothy Day.
Shakespeare. Sappho. Sojourner Truth.

When you walk to your car, to the mailbox,
to the video store, let each step
be a prayer ...
And if you are riding on a bicycle
or a skateboard, in a wheel chair, each revolution
of the wheels a prayer as the earth revolves:
less harm, less harm, less harm...

Shovel leaves or snow or trash from your sidewalk.
Make a path. Fold a photo of a dead child
around your VISA card. Scoop your holy water
from the gutter. Gnaw your crust.
Mumble along like a crazy person, stumbling
your prayer through the streets..."

In conclusion, I say to you, I say to God in all Her many names, I
say to the "interdependent web of all existence of which we are a
part," I say to the communities with whom we "feel comfortable
enough sharing the concerns of our hearts":

I pray that our congregation of curious and loving people find
peace in the midst of life's difficulty. If there is to be no
immediate end to our challenges, I pray that this community draws
together its many gifts and blessings in service to the journey
ahead.

I pray that the religious inquiry that lives among us grow in its
passion and its vision.

And, with this inquiry, I pray that we find the courage to give
word to the most vulnerable and honest parts of ourselves.

To you and to all that is greater than ourselves I say "please" and
"thank you." Let us all say, "Amen."