

***On Prayer*****Rev. Tracey Robinson-Harris****March 16, 2014****Readings:**from the Sermon on the Mount Matthew 6: 5-15 (King James Version of the Bible)

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. <sup>6</sup> But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. <sup>7</sup> But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen *do*: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. <sup>8</sup> Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. <sup>9</sup> After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. <sup>10</sup> Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as *it is* in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. <sup>14</sup> For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: <sup>15</sup> but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

excerpt from Help, Thanks, Wow by Anne Lamott (Preface: Prayer 101)

. . . I have come to believe. . . that there's something to be said about keeping prayer simple. Help. Thanks. Wow. . . Prayer is communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding. . . a cry from deep within to Life or Love with capital L's. . . Sometimes the first time we pray, we cry out in the deepest desperation, "god help me." This is a great prayer, as we are then at our absolutely most degraded and isolated, which means we are nice and juicy with the consequences of our best thinking and are thus possibly teachable. .

Prayer is taking a chance against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up...

Prayer is us – humans merely being as e.e. cummings put it – reaching out to something having to do with the eternal, with vitality, intelligence, kindness even when we are at our most doomed and utterly skeptical. . . prayer is our sometimes real selves trying to communicate with the Real, with Truth. . .

Help. Thanks. Wow. . . Amen

## Sermon

As a Southern Baptist child I learned that prayer is from the heart, spontaneous and said out loud. I was a shy girl and when the time came in our Sunday School assembly for someone to be called on to pray, I was always praying – please not me, not me! I was not afraid to talk to god. I was afraid to speak in front of all those other kids. What if I said it wrong? What if I couldn't think of anything to say?

The only exception to spontaneous prayer I can recall is when we prayed The Lord's Prayer from memory. It seems I have known this prayer all my life. I learned the King James Version with the occasional "thy" and "thine". This is a prayer for help - god help me do what you want me to do, give me what I need to live, help me practice forgiveness, help me refrain from doing harm, help me. With each recitation, the words became more familiar, comfortable. . . spoken like a much loved psalm or poem as much as a prayer.

Eventually the language of Lord and Father were no longer images of comfort or help. The god they addressed was no longer my god. I stopped praying. I started searching for other words and images for the divine.

In the midst of that search, I spent a few months serving as a hospital chaplain. One of the patients I visited regularly was a man I met my very first day. He had cancer of the mouth and throat. When I was with him, he always asked that we read the Bible together. And he always asked that I pray with him, pray for him. He did not give a hoot about my struggle with language for the divine. It wasn't the Lord's Prayer he wanted. After we read from the Gospel of John, he wanted one of those spontaneous, from the heart, out loud prayers. One that asked god for help, one that reminded him his faith gave him hope, one that let him know he was not alone. I remember taking a deep breath. I vaguely remember muttering something on the inhale; something which must have been my version of a prayer for help finding words. Then I'd pray. . . . out loud. Because he was so very hard of hearing, I prayed out loud very very loudly. The nurses always knew when I was on the floor!

In that hospital room, and many others I visited, prayers were always of the "help" variety. Sometimes there were words of thanks, too - thanks for care provided by doctors and nurses, thanks for the love of family. I don't remember any words of wow. Except my own . . . usually uttered in the face of extraordinary courage by a patient. With each patient, in every room. . . . it was definitely a case of "prayer is us – humans merely being." With the man in that room where I prayer so loudly – prayer was definitely us. A man dying of cancer. A chaplain doing her best. "Reaching out to something having to do with the eternal, with vitality, intelligence, kindness . . .when we are at our most doomed and utterly skeptical."

Anne Lamott wrote her own prayer for help, one she says uses in a pinch.

*Hi God. I am just a mess. It is all hopeless. What else is new? I would be sick of me if I were you, but miraculously you are not. I know I have no control over other people's lives, and I*

*hate this. Yet I believe that if I accept this and surrender, you will meet me wherever I am. Wow, can this be true? If so, how is this afternoon – say two-ish? Thank you in advance for your company and your blessings. You have never once let me down. Amen.*

I notice that she managed to get some thanks and a wow in there along with help.

Anne Lamott's prayer in a pinch. My spontaneous hospital room prayers. And the Lord's Prayer. Help.

One of the gifts of serving as your interim minister is the opportunity to return again to my own roots in the Christian tradition, and to become reacquainted with The Lord's Prayer, a "beautiful pre-assembled prayer. . ." writes Anne Lamott, ". . . a dressier prayer, a good china prayer". . . used "for special occasions" Anne says, "when I'm able to get into a state of trust."

In getting to know this prayer again after a long time away, I realize at one time or another I've experienced the connections many of you have. This prayer holds something of the sacred. It is a source of comfort. It is precious in its familiarity, a reminder of things cherished. The traditional language of the King James version – with "they kingdom come, thy will be done" - is akin to poetry. It would not be worship without it.

And at one time or another I have experienced the lack of connection many of you know. The words just can't be spoken. Some words can be said and not others. There are other modern interpretations of this prayer we can say together. Worship needs a variety of prayers from many sources.

Some of you have commented, too, on the changes I've made in the version of the Prayer we use in worship. For several weeks the order of service has included the translation from the New Revised Standard Version, calling it the prayer from the Sermon on the Mount. The changes reflect Jesus as teacher rather than Lord, and maintain a connection to the deep roots of this congregation in Unitarian Christianity. These changes move away from the King's English to a translation more in keeping with the original languages and reflect insights from sources available from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century until the publication of the NRSV in the 1980s. Perhaps the changes also offer you a chance to reconsider what this prayer means, and means for you. If that is the case, I hope you will join me next Sunday following the service for a conversation about this prayer and about prayer in a Unitarian Universalist context.

Prayer comes in many shapes. The three we shared with our hands. Prayers of help from the Sermon on the Mount or a hospital room. Today our Common Prayer is one of thanks. If you still have the words handy, please join me once again in this prayer by Maya Angelou:

*I want to thank You, God,  
For life and all that's in it.*

*Thank You for the day  
And for the hour and for the minute.*

*I know many are gone;  
I'm still living on.*

*I want to thank You.*

There are prayers that call us to pay attention, to remember – like the words of Mother Teresa in today’s choral anthem: *Peace begins with a smile. If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.*

There is prayer as service when deep faith is expressed in action – as shared by BYKOTA las Sunday with a shopping cart and grocery bags; as reflected in the words of Bengali Poet Rabindranath Tagore: *I slept and dreamed that life was happiness. I awoke and saw that life was service. I served and found in service, happiness.*

For now a final thought about prayer . . . and candles and cards and the practice of speaking names softly into shared silence.

I grew up in a part of the South where “Bless your heart” and “I’m praying for you” are as common in conversation as “Howdy” and “How are you?” Sometimes it’s another bit of hospitality. Sometimes it’s an expression of the sincere belief that another is lost, doomed, and in need of soul saving.

During the days I spent in Lynchburg when my mom was dying, many folks - neighbors, friends, hospital staff, care givers, folks I barely knew. . would say at the conclusion of some encounter. . . I’m praying for you. At first I brushed it off as nothing more than polite habit under the circumstances. After a while I found myself saying thank you. Though I was “home” I was in a place I had left 35 years ago far away from my own community. I found support there with a few friends, and with the local Unitarian Universalist minister. And. . .and once I decided to accept that all those folks who said they were praying for me really were . . . once I accepted that. . . I had this sense of being held, of being somehow “lifted up.” Prayer didn’t change things. It changed something inside me.

Each Sunday when a candle is lit on the side table, when a prayer card is left there for me to share. . . each Sunday when we speak names softly into a shared silence. . .we do that. We “hold” each and every one whose name is written, spoken and held in thought. For those brief moments each and every one is lifted up. And so may we all be. And so may we all be. . . as we sing our closing hymn, Go Lifted Up.