

WHAT'S IN A PRAYER

A sermon by the Reverend John H Nichols

Once a friend of mine persuaded me to coach a Little League baseball team. The other coaches were very pleased to have a preacher on board to elevate their image in town, and perhaps they thought I would be an easy mark. Which I was. When I went to the first coaches meeting while the other coaches were going eye-to-eye and nose-to-nose over promising ten and eleven year old pitchers I said just give me any fifteen kids, and we'll have a good season.

We had a 50-50 good season with fifteen kids that no one else wanted, and at the end they asked me to give the invocation at the annual banquet. Being young and idealistic I wanted to make the point that some of us had allowed the desire to win to get a little out of hand. So, as part of my invocation I asked God to help us keep the fun of playing the game as our central perspective.

Afterwards all agreed that this was a wonderful message, and they told me so, including one coach who earlier had protested to the league the game in which my team beat his. He protested because he said the pitching rubber from which his son pitched was an inch off the

regulation distance to the plate. He had gone home to get a tape measure in order to support his protest.

To my surprise I was asked to invoke the same banquet for several more years. I took every opportunity to sharpen my message about keeping competition in perspective. They seemed to love that message every time they heard it although it had absolutely no effect on their behavior. Finally I understood. They wanted me to address this thought to God because my doing so seemed to absolve them from ever having to put the same sentiments into practice.

For a long time after that I was a little cynical about public prayer. It occurred to me that most banquet prayers have less effect than the roles and the salad, which will be served as soon as the preacher stops talking. Yet banquet prayer survives perhaps as a very modest ritual atonement for our lapses in thankfulness generally. And they give the preacher a chance to demonstrate that he/she really should have been the main speaking event.

Private prayer, it seemed to me, was another matter. In it we confront our relationships with power or with the absence of power. Were we ever made to feel guilty about our prayers or the lack of them?

Did we ever pray for something and then it did not happen? Did we ever wonder if our prayers were not heeded, because God doesn't like us? Were we once taught that only weak people need to pray; that strong people have no reason to do so, because they just make things happen for themselves? Or, finally, did we fail to get beyond the question of who, if anyone, was listening to those prayers. All of these are experiences I have heard from parishioners over the years.

Many years ago I was visiting a seriously ill parishioner, and as I had reached the end of my visit I got up to leave and, knowing her to be a staunch Humanist, I said, something like "You'll be in my thoughts." She responded with a twinkle in her eye, "That's what all of my liberal friends say. But if you've also got any prayers. I'd be happy to have them."

This brought me up short. Why had I not offered the one thing that belongs to my profession in such situations? I know why now. I was afraid of appearing unsophisticated or of suggesting a faith less concrete than in medical science. And yet in every congregation I've served, which has a moment for "Joys and Sorrows" in the service, a parishioner has asked that the congregation keep a loved one "in their

prayers.” So it seems there is a lot of latent belief in prayer going around.

I’ve come to believe that prayers are important, not because God needs to hear them, and not depending on whether or not there is an affirmative response, but prayers are important because we need to say them regardless of whether there is a divine response.

The Reverend Douglas Taylor, a Unitarian Minister, wrote that there are roughly five different kinds of prayers and they are typified by a short phrase. They are, “Wow”, “Thank you”, “Sorry” “Please” and Silence. I’ll repeat them: “Wow”, “Thank you”, “Sorry”, “Please” and Silence.

“Wow” is the way we feel when we reach the top of a mountain and there before us lies all of the countryside for miles on end. The land is lit or shaded by variations in the sunlight on the landscape. It is a scene that not even the greatest artist or photographer can appreciate better than the hiker who has worked hard to get there and now finds it was all worth it. “Wow!”

It is also the way I always feel after listening to the last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth symphony or an exquisitely sung aria from a Puccini opera. Each of us has his or her own “Wow” moments, and it

seems important to acknowledge them openly because they have to balance out the many other moments in life that are purely mundane or worse.

The prayer I prayed today includes this phrase: “ Grant us a heart wide open to all of this joy and beauty and save our souls from being so absorbed in care or so darkened by selfishness that we pass heedless and unseeing, when even the thorn bush by the wayside is aflame with the glory of God.”

The second form of prayer is “Thank you.” Any number of events in a full life can cause us to feel thankful that we have life, health, friends, family, work, leisure, good advice and the strength to survive our own mistakes. What we may have to be thankful for is not always readily apparent, and that is why we need to acknowledge explicitly those moments and qualities for which we are grateful.

Being the family preacher, I am always asked to say grace over our Thanksgiving meals. It is a prayer of thankfulness for the many ways in which a family can be generous, loving and supportive. Now I say this prayer knowing full well that I am not always so grateful that all of the people around that table are in my life, but I need to remind myself

gently as well as remind my family of what we are or could be in our best moments.

Thankfulness prayers are sometimes hard to come by, because there are rough patches in life that we really struggle to get beyond. Perhaps all of us know people who rarely if ever make this prayer and that is profoundly detrimental to their spiritual and psychological health. This is why we have Thank you prayers at worship in our hymns, in our readings, in our spoken prayers, and sometimes in our interaction with one another.

“Morning has broken, like the first morning, Black bird has spoken like the first bird. Praise for the singing, praise for morning...” And another, “We sing now together our song of Thanksgiving, rejoicing in goods that the ages have wrought, for life that enfolds us and helps and heals and holds us and leads beyond the goals which our forebears once sought. We sing of the freedoms which martyrs and heroes, have won by their labor, their sorrow, their pain; the oppressed befriending, their ampler hopes defending, their death becomes a triumph, they died not in vain.”

The third category is that there are prayers that say “I’m sorry.”

Not only is no one perfect, but each of us can do things that are very hurtful to other people. I'm told that in one of the Jewish High Holy Days services there is a litany of human follies and the congregation is encouraged to recognize and regret them publically through those words which are said or sung every year.

In the Episcopal book of common prayer these words are said every week. "We have done those things we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things we should have done." I find it very supportive to have the people around me join in that affirmation that we have the capacity to disappoint others and ourselves and, this is important, that we regret that deeply. It's always good to know you're not the only one who has fallen short of the mark.

The fourth form of prayer is "Please!" Please help me get better. Please help my friend get a job. Please make my mother or my friend well again. Some Unitarian Universalists tend to avoid this kind of prayer, either because they do not believe in God or because they don't believe this form of prayer works.

Well, maybe it doesn't and maybe it does sometimes. A prayer that begins "Please God help me get this promotion," is a prayer that does not reach beyond the order of one person's concerns. The key

word here is “caring”. A prayer or caring thought for someone else does connect with the love that many believe is the source of life and the only real support for the quality of our lives together.

How often have you heard a story of parents and children or siblings or old friends who suddenly, mysteriously “know” that a message of some kind has been sent to them. The message usually is that someone they love needs their support. This is not unusual. This reaching out without words is so common it no longer rates as a coincidence.

Nor is it unusual for people to sense that someone they love has just said goodbye to them, but they do not know until later that a death had occurred at the precise moment they thought they had received a message of “good-bye.” This also happens often. It happened in my own family. One way to understand it is to conjecture that we are not really that isolated from each other spiritually or from God by time or distance. We are connected in often mysterious ways both by the depth of our caring for this life and for those with whom we share it.

So, if I put you in my prayers or if you pray for someone we are both hoping intensely that a misfortune that seems to be looming over someone does not happen as we and perhaps that person fear. Will it

work? We don't know. But it will draw us closer to one another and to the source of life and love that strengthens most of us.

I've talked about prayers that say "Wow", "Thank you" "Sorry" and "Please." The final form of prayer is silence. I worked at a Quaker summer camp for many years. Our campers were upper middle class kids from the Northeast largely. We introduced them to daily silent worship for an hour on Sunday. Few of them were from Quaker families and most had no particular experience with religion or silence, and yet over the course of weeks most adjusted to it and even requested a meeting for worship when none was scheduled. This was my clue that it was working.

The discipline of silence, even for children, requires that you put down the antics and anxieties of your mind. Instead you listen to what is going on inside of your head. You don't fight it. You don't deny it, but listen. This is hard to do and it requires some time and discipline to get there. When Friends have settled in comfortably with one another they say that they are being "Led by the silence." What they mean is that in unusually powerful moments something in the silence knits them together.

Most of us, including me, are uncomfortable with silence in worship. At the First Parish in Lincoln there is a three-minute hourglass timer behind the pulpit. When the minister is ready to begin the prayer part of the service he turns the hourglass over and – this is important – he/she sits down to watch the sand run through the glass for three minutes. The prayers of the congregation follow, and they are the “Joys and Sorrows” of the service though much more thoughtfully centered than I have experienced elsewhere. The silence before spoken prayer is a vital part of their service in Lincoln and any preacher who attempts to cut it short will hear about it.

So what’s in a prayer? Working easily with other people has been prayer or an evening spent with close friends. Active listening has often been prayer and laboring to express myself on paper has taken me far enough out of my own internal world and its anxieties and has become a kind of prayer. Family celebrations can be a form of prayer though they can also be a fete of endurance. In my immediate family the brief moment when we held hands silently before the evening meal was always a moment of prayer for me.

Prayer is what draws us from ourselves and toward others – hence toward the source of Caring that is Life or Creation itself.

Religious institutions offer disciplines of prayer that work for thousands of people but not for everyone. Each of us needs to find that path for ourselves and that path will be our prayer.

Our deepest longing and caring, our working and our singing, our hoping and our praying connect with a mysterious strength which all religions believe is ultimate reality and which some call God. Our deepest hopes and dreams, our less selfish acts and kinder thoughts can accomplish more than we know. Do we have a prayer? Most of us do. The task is to appreciate what it really is.