

Praying In The Gap:  
The Problem, Promise and Perils of Prayer

Part One

You may be asked, as I occasionally am, what these times in here are all about. My answers to the question, “What do you do?” have varied over the years. I went through a phase when I would answer the “what do you do?” question by saying, “About what?”

I’ve always tried to answer the question about what I do in a way that would cause people to respond with something like, “Really? Tell me more.” Or, “I could use some of that.”

Currently what I am saying, when asked - and sometimes when not! - is: “I am trying to change the world by increasing religious knowledge and spiritual understanding.”

“Really? Tell me more.”

Okay. Here is more:

“If people grow in their knowledge and understanding of Sacred Mystery and in knowledge and understanding of their true identity, we will, as a consequence, learn to treat our neighbor as we would like to be treated because we will ‘get it’ that our neighbor is us. Wouldn’t that change the world?”

Then, step back and see what happens.

Though I may not say it every time we gather, those are my teaching goals: that we grow in our knowledge and understanding of Sacred Mystery, that we come to know that who we are is who we are in this Mystery and that we learn to live with kindness and compassion. I do believe that stepping into such a world-view will both contribute to our transformation and, therefore, to the transformation of the various worlds in which we live out our precious lives.

Today I want to talk with you about prayer. I am talking about prayer for several reasons:

For one thing, in talking about how the old no longer works, about how physics and other sciences are causing us to rethink the notion of God and in saying that there is no external theistic reality, which I refer to as a “sky-God,” the first question I get about this stance is, “What about prayer?” It is not the only question but the first one. The very question makes one wonder what is the belief about prayer behind that question.

Another reason I want to initiate this conversation is because I have seen more people give up on the spiritual undertaking because of a misunderstanding of both God and prayer than any other single thing. This is related to what we talked about last week: how can there be suffering in the world if God is loving and compassionate? And, if God is loving and compassionate, why do my loved ones die, sometimes after horrific suffering? In short, why don't I get what I want?

Another reason I want to talk about prayer is because I believe that prayer is a good and valid response to our current cultural context, especially the matter of gun violence. This is not the kind of prayer that is meant, or interpreted by many, when public figures say in response to yet another mass shooting, “Our thoughts and prayers are with the survivors.”

Still another reason is that I hope these remarks today might contribute to the motivation and content of either enhancing or initiating your own daily spiritual practice.

Also, though this applies to all the talks I offer in here, I want to reclaim both Jesus and the biblical tradition for those who have been turned off in one way or another by how both Jesus and the Bible have been hi-jacked by the Fundamentalists.

According to all four of the narratives we have in the Christian Scriptures that describe the life of Jesus, the one certain thing that we can say about him is that he was a person of prayer. So what about prayer?

I start with one definition of prayer. This is mine and it in no way encompasses all of the matter. One cannot put the content of all of spiritual practice in a sentence of two. As my teacher said to me decades ago, “You can put a thimble into the ocean but you cannot put the ocean into a thimble.”

Prayer is the process and practice of allowing ourselves to experience and then express the reality that we are embraced by God - and so is everyone else.

This, by the way, is the supreme relevance of Jesus and his teachings - that he lived and taught about boundary crossings that included everyone.

Let’s begin by talking about the problem of and with prayer. In the talks that follow I will talk about the promise of prayer and, then, the perils of prayer.

What I was taught by the church of my youth was, “God ALWAYS answers prayer.” Sometimes, I was told, it was with a “yes,” sometimes with a “no,” sometimes with “wait” But God always answers prayer.

Well, that is a clever out. God never loses at that game.

Another truth I was taught by that same church was that, according to what they said Jesus said, if I had faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, I could move a mountain.

I don’t know if you have ever tried that or not but my batting average on that one is zilch. I tried it, likely knowing me, more than once. I only ended up feeling bad about myself. Clearly I was a person with zero faith, not even as big as a mustard seed. When I complained about this to the adults who had taught me this religious “truth,” I was told that it was not meant to be taken literally. “But,” I protested, “I thought you said teachings in the Bible were literally true.” They said, “Go play outside.”

I would have no trouble whatsoever spending the rest of our time today telling you heartbreaking and mind-staggering stories about people who earnestly and seriously prayed for something. These people were sincere, religious - in the best

sense of that word. They did not get what they wanted or, more importantly, what they prayed so earnestly for.

A number of years ago a young girl was diagnosed with leukemia. Today the researchers and physicians who specialize in such illnesses have developed treatments that can lead to remission and even cure of such conditions. At this time not so much.

This was the only child of the parents. The father was a clergyman much beloved by his congregation. The mother was clearly also held in high esteem.

This particular form of leukemia was very aggressive and the doctors had not given much hope or much time to the young girl. I do not know nor do I want to know the heartbreaking event it is for a parent to lose a child.

The people in the church of which this father was minister went on the offensive about this. I use the word “offensive” in an almost literal fashion. They created an around the clock prayer chain, they called themselves “prayer warriors,” to pray for this young girl.

They could point to many passages in Scripture that justified their stance. After all, Paul writes in one of his letters that people are to “pray without ceasing.” Jesus is quoted in Matthew as saying, “Ask and it will be given to you.” There are numerous passages in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian collection that clearly state that all things are possible with God. They were simply taking God at God’s word. “All things are possible with God” the Scripture says.

You probably already know where part of this story is going. The young girl died.

I didn’t have access to all the people involved in this drama. For some the death of the girl provided a real crisis of the faith they had embraced up until that time. Again I will say it: I have seen more people give up the spiritual path because of such an event than any other single thing. I think it was in seminary when I first heard the cynical and satirical line: “Nothing fails to work better than prayer.”

When it became apparent that the end was in sight for this girl, some of the people who had been fervently praying for her recovery shifted to praying simply that “God’s will be done.” If they were aware that they had moved away from their initial conviction that God would do whatever was asked and that God could perform miracles, they didn’t seem to acknowledge such. Faithfulness to God shifts into being “whatever happens is the will of God.”

This theology is a slippery slope indeed. If one prays that God spare us from the hurricane and this the hurricane slams into us, then God doesn’t answer prayer. If the hurricane goes somewhere else, God answers our prayers but not the prayers of those who live in New Orleans where the hurricane does hit. The theistic God prayed to in these scenarios is partial, fickle, manipulative - even cruel.

The reason people give up on this God and the spiritual way is because they asked God for something clearly in accord to what scripture says God could do and it is not forthcoming so, to hell with this God. Which stance, in the minds of some people, just runs the risk of incurring more wrath from God.

Though I don’t remember hearing it in this particular case, I’ve certainly heard in similar circumstances things like:

“God wanted and needed her more in heaven than we needed her here.”

“This is part of a greater plan that God has in mind that we don’t or can’t see now.”

“Some day all of this will be made clear to us.”

These affirmations are designed to make it possible to continue believing, with significant modifications, what they have always believed.

Let me hasten to say that people do indeed learn to live with tragedies of all sorts. I have seen parents who have lost children develop the capacity to be an empathetic and supportive presence in the lives of others who have had similar losses.

At the beginning of my private practice I had a young man I was seeing who was, during that period of time, the victim of a brutal car accident that led to his losing

his right leg. He never recover emotionally from that. He remained in a pile of pity and rage from that moment on - as far as I knew. During that time I heard of another man, in Canada, who lost his right leg to cancer. After an appropriate period for psychological and physical adjustment, he got involved in running marathons across Canada to raise money and awareness for cancer research.

It was then that it struck me that there is no meaning in the event of losing a leg - until we give it one. That, said Victor Frankl, out of his experience in a German concentration camp, is the one freedom that cannot be taken from us: the freedom to give meaning to the events of our lives. Frankl's book, "Man's Search For Meaning" was the first required reading when I began my clinical training in 1966.

A theology that worked for many up until we have entered the land of the "no-longer" is a theology that claimed that there is a divine plan worked out by a God who has the power to pull a string here or there and to keep things in this God's control. It is claimed that the plan of this God is never fully revealed so we must trust and learn to walk by faith.

As I have earlier indicated, whenever noise is made about there being no external, theistic, interventionist God in the sky, the place where that notion most clearly collides with what is called "traditional Christian theology" is around this notion of prayer. "If there is no such God, to whom do we pray?" "If there is no such God, why bother with any of it at all?" This is the problem with prayer. At least partially expressed.

When I hear these kinds of questions and statements, it makes me wonder what the person asking them thinks prayer is in the first place. Is God nothing more than a sanctified Santa Claus? It is easy to see how people reach that conclusion since, because of the misbegotten notion of "original sin," God is a father figure in the sky who "has a list and is checking it twice, he knows who's been bad and good, he knows who's been naughty and nice."

For these people it seems that the ability of God to respond to their prayers is the point at which their faith lives or dies.

The assumption that seems to be behind most of the questions I get about prayer is that prayer is asking of or informing God about things God doesn't already know about. Further that God is, again and sadly, off out there somewhere and can intervene if he really wants to do so in either a personal crisis or some natural disaster or national crisis. This doesn't count, of course, the sports teams God has to be busy helping to win.

Religions and the doctrines that make them up are human constructions. This make sense? Human beings create their religious rituals and beliefs out of the culture in which they live using the symbols and language of that culture. Does this make sense?

This is why religions differ from culture to culture and country to country and it is how these religions do, or do not, change over time. For example, "being washed in the blood of the lamb" meant something very different to the Jewish people who first used this phrase, not literally but liturgically, and the followers of Jesus who appropriated the phrase and applied it to Jesus' crucifixion and, then, to my grandfather who lived very close to the land by raising, slaughtering and eating animals from his own flocks. Both culturally and linguistically this image of being washed in the blood of the lamb is very distant from us.

Sometime, not today, I want to talk about how in the evolution of the human race our ancestors went from a more animistic and incarnational understanding of the Sacred - meaning, God was seen in everything around them, in the trees, the wind, the water, the fire, etc. - to an understanding of an external, theistic, interventionist God. Suffice it to say today that it came out of tribal development where the notion of the chief of the tribe, as well as other main players in tribal identity - the shaman and warrior, primarily - got projected to a God in the sky that was a bigger and more powerful version of themselves. This tribal mentality was very patriarchal so the feminine was excluded from this construction. That is not what this talk is about.

When, however, our ancestors were coming to terms with the helplessness they felt in the face of not only death but also of enemies both human and not they sought help from their understanding of God to protect them.

Prayer thus became over the long arc of history an attempt to exercise control in those areas of life when we felt out of control and weak. When prayer doesn't work in the way or ways believers in an external, theistic, interventionist God hope for; then come the convoluted explanations. This God must be shown to be in control - no matter what.

Growing old, getting sick and dying are on the agenda for all of us - if we are lucky. Some people aren't. They get leukemia as children. In my case I inherited a predisposition for retina detachments. There may be some connection between that and my having coronary artery disease. Luck played a part in my being in Houston, Texas and not Columbia, Tennessee so that this disease could be found and treated. Innocent people are killed by drunk drivers or they are shot in high-school by a psychotic person who had easy access to a killing machine. These are the facts of human existence. They are not the ways of God.

The theistic system that gave birth to such thinking is dying. Theism is, however, a security blanket with which many people are reluctant to part. But when the crisis comes, security blankets are not adequate to deliver what we hope for.

So, what about prayer?

I do not believe in, indeed rather forcefully reject, the notion of an external, interventionist God. But, I pray. I pray daily. I pray not because I believe in God but because I know God - there is a huge difference - and want to nurture my relationship with Sacred Mystery. I pray with an awareness of and confidence in the sacred relatedness of all that is and all who are.

If there is no external, interventionist God in the sky, to whom do I pray? And, how do I pray?

I would start answering these questions by saying that it might be helpful to retire the word "prayer" for a while. It is, I think, virtually impossible to use that word without being drawn back into the notion that we pray to a "god" who is "out there" somewhere. This is why I nag you to have a "spiritual practice" and not "to pray." Words like "meditation," "contemplation" and "spiritual practice" might serve us better.



Father Thomas Keating has, borrowing from the Buddhist tradition, developed a form of contemplative meditation called “centering prayer.” There is a group here at St. Paul’s that meets for this each week. I commend it to you. Anything you can do to create more “self awareness” - not “self-centeredness” - and being “present” will help create a new understanding of what authentic prayer is all about.

I will repeat here something I said at the beginning of this talk:

Prayer is the process and practice of allowing ourselves to experience and then express the reality that we are embraced by God - and so is everyone else.

This, by the way, is the supreme relevance of Jesus and his teachings - that he lived and taught about boundary crossings that included everyone.

It is said that soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed a man on the road who was struck by the extraordinary radiance and peacefulness of his presence. The man stopped and asked, “My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being, or a god?”

“No,” said the Buddha.

“Well, then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?”

Again the Buddha answered, “No.”

“Are you a man?”

“No.”

“Well, my friend, what, then are you?”

The Buddha replied, “I am awake.”

Wakefulness begins to emerge when we cultivate stability of mind and a genuinely open heart. Fundamental to this wakefulness is an ability to live completely in this

present moment, to witness the drama of consciousness without getting lost in the endless distractions created by the mind. Jesus taught that one of the best paths to this wakefulness is by following spiritual disciplines. One of those disciplines is prayer

These are the things that lead us to be:

Aware. Right here.

Alert. Right now.

Attentive. Accepting what is.

Present. Simply noticing.

Because I have been given him from my childhood I have an image of Jesus as a person who by his example creates in me a yearning to be more deeply the person I am and to be able, as he did, to increase the circle of my life and love to include everyone. I'm still working on growing in this way. On the occasions when I am open to such living, I experience an expansiveness in my own life.

Sadly, our culture has conditioned most of us to operate on the basis that if we don't get something out of it, it must not be worthwhile. Why does there have to be a payoff for being good? Why does there have to be a payoff for experiencing and then expressing peace, love and joy? Isn't being focused on a payoff just keeping ourselves in the center of the picture? Is prayer not worth doing for its own sake without expecting or needing a payoff?

When Paul writes, "Pray without ceasing," he was referring to a way of life.

We are going to get around to talking about what the Fundamentalists mean when they talk about "the second coming." I am thinking now that for a life-style and theology of living in the gap between the "no-longer" and the "not-yet" a reinterpretation of "the second coming" is a realization that it is the same God who was present in Jesus coming again into our world in us and through us. I wonder,

and I got this question from John Shelby Spong, if we might dare to embrace the possibility that we ourselves might be the second coming of Christ?

One of the perils of prayer, and we'll talk more about these, is that the view of God as a protector of us from the sometimes painful and always deadly aspects of being human presents us with a God that we must please, placate, flatter and beg; one who in the process of relating to we are reduced to childlike dependency. (This thinking is also influenced by Spong's brilliant works.)

I want you to know that I know that what I am about to say cannot be said:

God's power is already present in our lives. There is nothing we can do to get God to love us more or to love us less. We don't need to beg God to come and help us. God is with us, no matter what. God does not protect us from being human or from the consequences of living in this world. But, if we allow it, God will sustain us in and through all of it.

I would encourage you to develop a spiritual practice that leads you in the direction of being able to embrace the fragility of being human and then empower you to step boldly into the world living loving lives, making peace and spreading joy. You can reject or not believe in an external, interventionist God and still embrace this understanding of the Sacred.

I would not encourage you to do something I do not do. I have a daily spiritual practice. Certainly the way I do it may not fit you but several of you have asked what I mean by "having a daily spiritual practice" and what mine is. So, here goes:

I have had for years, decades!, the habit of devoting the first hour or so of my day to the kind of prayer I'm talking about.

Here fits the story, because all of you are also so busy and scheduled, of the reporter who once asked Mother Teresa if it was true that she prayed an hour every morning. She acknowledged that she did. "But," said the reporter, "you are a very busy person. What if you don't have an hour?" "Then," came the reply, "I pray for two hours."

“What do you say to God during this time?”

“I don’t say anything. I just listen.”

“What does God say?”

“God doesn’t say anything. God just listens.”

I have written and edited and modified and played with over the years a piece I call “My Daily Practice.” I read it every single day I remain above ground.

Right now piece begins with the intentions I have undertaken to enhance this liturgical season of the year - Lent. Again, we will get to this in this series but liturgy, which means “the work of the people,” is something inherited from the Jewish tradition. The Christian writings, especially the Jesus narratives of Mark, Matthew and Luke were written in response to the Jewish liturgical year. I’ll bet you not one or two Christians in a hundred, perhaps a thousand, have been taught this.

I also have as part of this daily practice document some thoughts and beliefs I’ve taken from Buddhism, like the remembrances:

I am of the nature to grow old, I cannot escape growing old.

I am of the nature of have ill health. I cannot escape having ill health.

I am of the nature to die. I cannot escape death.

All that is dear to me, and everyone I love, are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.

I inherit the results of my acts of body, speech and mind. My actions are my continuation.

I also have the names of people I “pray for” every day. Members of my family, dear friends, especially those who are having difficult passages of one sort or another, people who have asked me to pray for them. We’ll talk more about this next week.

I have a prayer by Thomas Merton that I read every day.

I include in this time writing in my gratitude journal and also reading in spiritual or theological works that give me an opportunity to stretch.

It was from training in Vipassana meditation that I learned about increasing my desire that all people be peaceful and at ease in ever larger circles, noticing where my heart closes.

When I started this practice I had a much more theistic notion of God than I have now. But as my understanding of the Sacred has changed my practice has not. The meaning of this practice has changed dramatically. The biggest shift for me has been in a growing awareness that my spiritual practice is not confined to that hour or so period in the morning, it is extended throughout my day. We'll also talk about this more.

I do believe that this daily spiritual practice prepares me more adequately to live the life I have been given, to be prepared to be with you and to be with you like this. I know that this time has changed me, opened me, strengthened me.

Prayer is a time for me to discover who I am in God and who God is in me. My hope is to live my life out of that knowledge. The only thing I'm interested in changing is me.

So, yes, I pray. I pray, given this understanding, constantly. But I pray non-theistically. For me, to pray without ceasing is to seek the Sacred in everything and everyone and, insofar as I am able, to be that kind of presence wherever I show up.

I pray that you will take this kind of spiritual practice into your own life.

Because this, I believe, will help change us and, thereby, our world.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.