

Prayer: Fact, Fantasy, Farce

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar
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The ancient Greek historian and biographer Plutarch observed, "If we traverse the world, it is possible to find cities without walls, without letters, without wealth, without coin, without schools or theatres: but a city without a temple, or that practices not worship, prayer and the like, no one has ever seen."

As a Unitarian Universalist minister I know that there are people in this congregation who are uncomfortable with prayer. Today I want to look at two questions. If we pray, who or what are we praying to? And if we don't pray, is it because we've somehow transcended this deep and ancient human impulse or is it that we sometimes pray in ways that are not typically thought of as prayer?

According to Larry Dossey, who has done extensive research on prayer, when we talk about prayer here in the United States, the first thing most people think of is that "Prayer is talking aloud or silently to a white, male, cosmic parent figure who prefers being addressed in English."

With that in mind, I want to explain how I came up with today's topic. Some years ago I did a chaplaincy internship at MGH. It was an interfaith chaplaincy, so I didn't just give spiritual support to Unitarian Universalists; I tried to provide care and support for people of all faith traditions and those with no faith tradition in the best way that I could. Many people like to pray with the chaplain, so I needed to think about what prayer meant for me and how I felt about praying with people of many faiths and denominations.

One day I entered the room of an Asian man who looked depressed and in pain. I introduced myself as the chaplain and he greeted me with a look of suspicion and despair. I figured he might not be Christian and he had possibly had some bad experiences in the past with people trying to convert him. I asked if I could sit down, and we spent the next fifteen minutes or so talking. His story was one of incredible physical and mental suffering. He never smiled, his face looked anguished and he barely looked me in the eyes. At one point I asked if he meditated. He said he used to, but not since the pain had gotten so bad. Then I asked if he ever prays. He said, "Yes." And quickly added, "To Buddha!"

"That's great!" I said, "Would you like to pray with me?"

"To Buddha?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, to Buddha."

"Okay" he told me as he assumed a cross-legged posture and straightened his back, folding his hands face up on his lap. Fortunately I had studied a little about Buddhism and I knew to address the prayer to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. This is the teacher, the teachings and the community of people who keep the teachings alive. In my prayer I was able to reflect back to him the people, places and events that he had mentioned. So, he knew I had been paying attention and that I remembered his story. I also asked for health and happiness for him and his family and remembered his ancestors. When I opened my eyes, I was shocked to find him looking me right in the face with a big genuine smile and then tears began slowly rolling down his face. We talked for a while longer and I saw him a few more times before he left the hospital.

When I discussed this story with the other chaplain-interns, some of the non-Unitarian Universalists weren't sure how they would feel about praying to Buddha. As you can imagine, it made for a rich discussion. They asked me, as a Unitarian Universalist, who I prayed to. I explained that not all Unitarian Universalists pray, but that I pray regularly and I told them that I usually address my prayers to God, but I admitted that I am not always so sure what that means to me. The truth is that sometimes when I'm in prayer, it does seem as if I am

addressing that old bearded man in the clouds. But other times I feel I am connecting with the holiness that is in me and in everything and everyone around me. Then I thought I would really shock them by admitting that there are other times when I wonder if I am just fooling myself. I wonder if there is such a thing as God, and at those times I think I might just be communing with my own mind. But, I still find it helpful. So, I explained that for me I am not really sure to what or whom I am praying, but what I do know is that I find it very powerful and meaningful and that's why I do it.

So, since I am not really sure what the object of my prayers is, it's not really as important to me what we call it. Buddha, Allah, Jehovah, Spirit of Life, these are names that help us encounter and embrace the mystery and love at the core of life and death. Later that day I was talking with a Catholic priest who was present for the discussion, I said to him that it must be nice to believe with such devotion that you don't have these questions. He assured me that I was not alone and that even he wonders about the same things from time to time.

Some people are surprised that agnostics can pray. Like Buddhists for example. Their prayers are addressed to the teacher, teachings and community of believers or sometimes to the universe itself. Not believing in God never seems to stop them from praying. When I was in the Himalayan villages of Tibet, there were always people spinning beautiful prayer wheels. Each turn is thought to be equivalent to hundreds of prayers. Everywhere I went there were people spinning them. Some were so big they required two hands. Many people I know who don't subscribe to a personal god will say that they experience prayer as “a feeling of being connected to all that exists.”

To prepare for this sermon, I decided to ask people about their experiences of prayer. Some people said outright that they reject prayer. They see it as a crutch and as an illusion. They think it's a way that people try to avoid taking responsibility for their problems. They say that instead of helping ourselves we look for a super-cosmic hero to save us. Some people reject prayer because they see it as a “verbal exercise in selfishness,” a way people try to obtain things for themselves. And anyway, “who are we to tell the universe what to do?” There are people who reject prayer because they say they've tried it and it doesn't work. Dr. Larry Dossey, the author of “Prayer is Good Medicine” suggests that if we are going to ask for something in prayer we might want to consider that “There are many other perfectly good answers to a prayer, such as no, perhaps, maybe, not yet or we'll see.” He reminds us to “imagine the thousands of people who are praying for the one remaining parking space in downtown Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City or All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa.”

In Dr. Dossey's book he cites over three hundred and eighty scientific experiments looking into the validity of prayer. The conclusion is that statistically, “prayer is good for you!” The results of over two hundred and fifty scientific studies show that people who go to church and pray regularly are less likely to get ill, both mentally and physically, and when they do get sick, they cope with it more effectively.

Dossey tells us how some scientists try to explain the origins of prayer using evolutionary biology. Evolutionary theory proposes that those behaviors that help an organism survive are perpetuated through time. So, the fact that prayer has lasted so long demonstrates that it provides some advantage to the pray-er. If prayer was simply self-delusion, it should have died out through the long course of evolution. The evolutionary scientist will often try to explain this by saying that the positive faith that believers feel, that help will come, makes them work and struggle harder for that which they are trying to obtain. Some call it positive thinking, or a self-fulfilling prophecy or the placebo effect. Either way, even if it is an illusion, they admit it can work!

However, scientists cannot explain the effects of intercessory prayer when people are being prayed for without their knowledge. A cardiologist named Randolph Byrd did an experiment with 393 patients in the coronary care unit of San Francisco General Hospital. He divided the group in roughly equal parts based on their condition, age and other factors. Then he got prayer groups from around the United States to pray for

the people in one of his patient groups. It was a double blind experiment, so neither the patients nor their doctors or nurses knew that it was happening. The results showed scientifically significant differences in the rate of recovery of the people in the group being prayed for. The tests have shown that prayer can work even when a person doesn't know they're being prayed for. It also showed that it doesn't matter at what distance the prayer is being done. People being prayed for in the same city were effected the same as people being prayed for from across the country.

There have been over a hundred and thirty such controlled laboratory experiments on intercessory prayer that show positive effects on living things from humans to bacteria, and doctors and hospitals are beginning to take notice. As early as May of 1995, the Journal of the American Medical Association published an article entitled, "Should Physicians Prescribe Prayer for Health?" and Harvard Medical School has been sponsoring conferences on spirituality and health for the past few years.

Scientists can show that intercessory prayer works, but science cannot explain how or why it works. This reminds us of the saying, "Physicists never really understand a new theory, they just get used to it

I think it's a positive step that science and medicine are beginning to take prayer and spirituality more seriously. But there is much more to be said about prayer. Most of us would agree that prayer is much more than just words. And that as interesting as the scientific experiments are, our own experience of the power and effects of prayer is all we need to know. Dr. Dossey says that "in its simplest form, prayer is an attitude of the heart - a matter of being, not doing." If we think of prayer as a drive to connect with something outside of ourselves, however this something may be understood or conceived, then, the moment we feel the impulse to make the connection, we have begun to pray, whether we do it with words or not.

Dorothy Day said it like this: "Does God have a set way of prayer, a way that he expects each of us to follow? I doubt it. I believe some people - lots of people - pray through the witness of their lives, through the work they do, the friendships they have, the love they offer people and receive from people. Since when are words the only acceptable form of prayer?"

Here is what some of the people I interviewed had to say about their experience of prayer. For one person I talked to, Josh, music is the most profound example of prayer. He's a singer and he told me of experiences while singing when he gets to a point where he forgets himself and is fully present with the music and with the moment. Also while singing with a choir or just with two or three other people, he explained how he can feel deeply moved by the sound of the integration of the voices together, the harmony, more beautiful than any one voice alone. He also told me of an experience when someone he cared about died and he went into a quiet chapel all by himself and played the piano and sang hymns full of grief and passion. Through the songs he experienced his grief and anger lifted-up and somehow communicated. For him this was prayer.

Another person, my friend Arrington, who runs marathons, talks about the experience of prayer she feels while running. She told me of an experience while running the New York Marathon and getting to the sixteenth mile and feeling like she couldn't go any further on her own; at that point she felt as if she gave herself over and felt carried by something more than herself. She says it felt as if it was coming from the trees and the ground and the sky. She says she closed her eyes and asked God for help and just kept on running. As it turns out, she finished the last ten miles three minutes faster on average than the first sixteen.

Arrington and others also told me about feeling prayer when they take some time to sit quietly in a special place. It could be on the beach or in the park. For some it is a quiet place in their home. A special chair. Or a place where they put some objects like a cross, a Buddha, a feather and maybe some pictures. Taking a few moments to sit alone in silence each day allows them to feel replenished, to gather strength and find peace. And even if it's not everyday, when it happens it's a form of prayer for them.

My colleague Missy told me that being out in nature, in the mountains or the woods is where she feels the highest experience of prayer. It's while hiking that Missy expressed feeling humbled by the vastness of it all, feeling connected to the natural world and filled with awe and wonder. For those of us like Missy, this is an experience of prayer, an experience of communion with all that exists...with the power of the universe, with God.

For my Italian friend Marcelo, who is in seminary to become a Catholic priest, he finds prayer in a quiet, dark, place like a church. It begins with a Psalm from the Bible. For him the Psalms help him feel connected to people all over the world both Jewish and Christian who pray in the same way and even at the same time, and to all those people over thousands of years who've used these same words for inspiration. After reading a psalm, he will begin to let his mind say what comes to it as he silently speaks with God. It's in tradition that Marcelo feels the deepest prayer.

Then, there are the people who express prayer as action. These people sometimes talk about helping others as a prayer of thanks for all the blessings they have received. It might mean helping a mother carry her stroller down a flight of stairs or picking up litter in the park. Such prayers come in many forms as dedicating one's life to being a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, a parent, as well as many other vocations and volunteer activities that help build community or further the cause of justice and hope.

The list is endless and before long, things that all of us do would inevitably be included. We may not see some of our actions as prayers and some would indeed argue that if we do not understand them that way, then they are not really prayers. Therefore, I invite us all to consider why we do some of the things we do and see if we might begin to see the prayer-full-ness in them.

Finally, I want to say a word about prayer as love. Love involves reaching out and connecting with someone or something beyond ourselves. It involves letting go and transcending the boundaries between us and others. Love may be the purest form of prayer and seems to run through all the other types of prayer. It reminds me of the line from a song in the musical *Les Miserables* which says, "To love another person is to see the face of God."

"To love another person is to see the face of God." Let us pray without ceasing!