"Common Sense - Prayer"

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Opening Words – From Mark Van Doren

For a long time now, I have carried deep within me a poem by Mark Van Doren, as a centering meditation. I find prayer in its whisperings of thanksgiving, confession, acceptance, and affirmation of Life, out of which I find strength.

O World, my friend, my foe
My deep dark stranger, doubtless
Unthinkable to know;
My many and my one,
Created when I was and doomed to go
Back into the same sun;

O World, my thought's despair,
My heart's companion, made by love
so intimate, so fair
Stay with me till I die....

O air,
O stillness, O great sky....

After Responsive Reading

Bob Dylan, in his autobiography titled, Chronicles, describes a particular shop owner with slightly odd views. The shop owner at one point asked him,

“You a prayin' man, huh? What do you pray for? You pray for the world?”

Bob Dylan responded, “I never thought about praying for the world. I said, ‘I pray that I can be a kinder person.’”

Readings

(1) Words of Humanist colleague Lon Ray Call have helped me enormously. Lon Ray Call (born in 1894, who died in 1985 at age 91 years and one day) served as Associate Minister here with us from 1931-33. He worked for the American Unitarian Association and helped start Unitarian congregations across the South in the 1940s and
50s, including my home congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee. Although these words about how to approach prayer appear in Christian tradition in various sermons that I found on-line, affirming as they do God’s sovereignty, this Humanist leader is cited by my colleague Jack Mendelsohn:

"Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people change things."

(2) A second brief reading comes from the Austro-German poet Rainer Maria Rilke and comes to mind from time to time as a mantra, blessing, prayer... for example, midweek sometimes, when I come here to this quiet place and listen. More often than not, I sense and feel a deeper spirit, such great clouds of witnesses of our times together and generations past.

Rilke said, "Go into yourself and see how deep the place is from which your life flows."

Sometimes for me it is early on a Sunday morning – sometimes as the sun rises... a quietness and a renewal that is a blessing and reminder of wholeness.

Prayer may be understood as listening; Elijah was listening for "the still, small voice," sometimes translated as "a thin slice of silence" when self and world may no longer seem separate, when mystics feel there is ecstasy, a union, and when others experience simply the stillness and strength of renewal, as muddied waters of thought and feeling settle, and the waters of Life return clear, fresh and quenching.

(3) The poet Denise Levertov writes, “Thanks for this day, a day of my life.”

(4) From Kate Braestrup’s Beginner’s Grace – Bringing Prayer to Life. [Free Press, 2010, p. 21.] She is a Unitarian Universalist minister and a chaplain with the Maine Wildlife Service.

The true realist should expect what is most likely. That which is most likely is nothing.... Nothingness is the most possible – indeed the most probable – thing in the cosmos. Not only is there no inevitability involved when the fry cook gives you your french fries, the odds are a bazillion to one against either of you (or the potatoes) existing at all.

Yet here you are!

And here I am! How cool is this?

I can’t thank myself for the impossible fact of my existence. With all due respect, I can’t thank you for it, either. Maybe I don’t have to thank
anyone for it – but I am thankful, dammit! And I’m sure it’s bad for my blood pressure to keep all that thankfulness bottled up inside.

If, as my husband defines it, disappointment is the feeling you get when reality doesn’t meet your expectations, gratitude is the feeling you get when reality exceeds your expectations. The truly rational, realistic person should feel overwhelmingly grateful all the time.

“Common Sense – Prayer”
Rev. Bruce Southworth

Be Here Now

Once upon a time, as ministry took its hold upon me and as leading worship and preaching became part of my spiritual life, I began to pray before each sermon… sort of.

As a low-grade mystic, a Humanist, a rationalist who seeks, in growing my soul, to be a caretaker of wonder, and appreciative of the divine Creativity within me, each of us, and all around us….

In embracing that Spirit of Life that blesses and challenges, I have come to see disciplines of meditation, centering, and prayer as common sense. Long ago, it was a Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, who caught my attention in speaking about prayer not only as mindfulness and cultivating an attitude of gratitude, but also ultimately as “common sense.”

So, each Sunday, during the music, either before the readings or before the sermon, I offer a silent prayer… a centering. Internally, the short version is “Be here now.”

Be present in this time and place with this curious band of seekers, believers, and witnesses to love… and Life’s possibilities.

Be here now…

“O World, my friend, my foe” - Questions

Day by day, common questions may arise: What do we do with mystery? “O World, my friend, my foe”… impossible to know in all its complexity, humanly created evils, and blessings.

A common sense reminder from the poet: “O World, … my heart’s companion made by love so intimate, so fair.”
What do we do with Life’s invitation to savor the world and to save, improve, the world? How do we do each of these – savor and save – 100% of the time?

What do we do with Life’s heartache… its heart breaking, shattering moments for which reason has no logic?

How do we keep saying Yes? How do we keep saying Yes to this gift when the epiphanies of love… of connection… of justice… of wonder… of beauty at times seem so distant?

How do we cultivate appreciative awareness and have Howard Thurman’s faith that not only is Life "alive", but “everything is sustenance”?

Prayer is Personal

One option is prayer… an option easy to dismiss if popular, egoistical expressions of prayer prevail. And prayer is such a loaded and personal matter.

Did you say your prayers when you were growing up? At bedtime, "Now I lay me down to sleep…"

At mealtime? "Bless this food and us to thy service?" Or some other words?

Did you join in prayer at Church? ("Our Father, who art in heaven...") Or at synagogue? ("Shema Yisrael") Or a mosque? ("Allahu akbar")

At sports events? "Bless these athletes...." Or Commencements?

Was prayer part of your family life, church life, or personal spiritual life as you grew up? Is it now?

For me, prayer was not part of my religious upbringing. I was something of an atheist, not angry, not rabid in my disbelief about God. But the God I heard most about in a fundamentalist culture in East Tennessee was an angry, punitive, judging God, not a loving God, and prayer made little sense to me.

However, I recall a period of time when there was a bedtime reverie, that in-between time of being awake and sleeping. I now realize that I was probably in prayer or meditation – connecting with and feeling something deeper, a peace that passes understanding.

And being of a rational bent, and alienated from the traditional religion around me, and having a hurtful notion of god, I gave it up. For a long time.
Revisiting Prayer

But as I have tried to grow my soul over the years, I discovered that centering prayer or meditation, prayers of thanks, and prayers of confession began to make sense.

Be here now....

Life is a gift. Give thanks....

New life, new possibilities await.... Give thanks....

People are precious. Caring counts ultimately.... Give thanks.

Life is wondrous and challenging.... Embrace it, all of it.... Live it. Give thanks with humility.

With Rilke and Buddhists, "Go into yourself and see how deep the place is from which your life flows." Common sense, to me these days.

Words of Humanist colleague Lon Ray Call also helped me enormously: "Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people change things."

This matter of prayer is deeply personal. We come with different experiences. Different wounds from it. Different joys. Different spiritual disciplines, and what works for some of us may not work for others.

This morning I want to look again at this matter of prayer. What? Why? When? How? Too much for one morning, but some starting points...

God is not to be “used”

Let’s dismiss at the outset childish petitionary prayers that flourish in our narcissistic culture and that ask God to fulfill personal life goals, or political goals. Just one example, familiar to some, comes from Mark Twain’s "War Prayer."

O Lord, our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle – be thou near them!... help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire.... [It goes on about creating widows and orphans and continues] blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage.... We ask it, in the spirit of love... with humble and contrite hearts.
Despite all such abuse that Twain rightfully mocks, prayer, healthy prayers, or call them practices of centering down, to embrace the breath of life, the rhythms of life – these do make sense.

One provocative guide is Matthew Fox – the former Dominican, now Episcopalian priest, having been silenced by the Roman Catholic Church – who has offered us so much about Original Blessing and Creation Spirituality.

He, for example, says that “God is useless. God is God.” God is not to be “used” for human purpose. And he notes we can do without the word God; it’s only a word, and instead we can speak of Life. Life is….

Life is a gift. And prayer is a radical – basic – response to Life… of appreciation, humility, wonder, compassion and action….

Saying Yes to Life (and Wow and Thanks)

In some measure, it is a mystic’s affirmation. Prayer says Yes to Life…. All of it, and prayer empowers us to change ourselves and the world. Which of course is at times, not really what we want – to change – given the seductions of our age: material stuff, the false god of individuality, the imperialism of state-corporate capitalism, and, well, the list goes on and on.

I also appreciate Rev. Kate Braestrup’s book, Beginner’s Grace – Bringing Prayer to Life, from which I took one of our readings.

What is prayer, for her? “Yes. Wow. And thanks.” (34) I know it is a little glib for some, but she offers helpful basics.

“Yes. Wow. Thanks.” That’s pretty good shorthand.

She speaks of her chattering, curious “monkey” mind (as Hinduism calls our tendencies for distraction). She acknowledges how easily we – she – gives in to worries, fears, control, insecurity, trivial images of prayer, or confusion/questions about God’s place in prayer and the difficulty in finding the right words. All that in her monkey mind.

She reminds us of something we basically know: we want “to live consciously, honorably and compassionately.” (9) That is what prayer “at its best and at our best has always done.”

In her own delightful and challenging way, she echoes Lon Ray Call’s words: "Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people change things." She writes about prayer, “Nothing in the material world has changed…. If life sucked
[before I began to pray] it sucketh still.” Yet, we can still say Yes to the big thing – the biggest thing: the gift of Life and live appreciatively with more love.

For her (and for me), God is Love…. That’s it! And Love blesses. So she prays: Yes, Wow. Thanks.

She reminds me of simple things: grace before meals…

For the food before us
And the friends beside us
And the love that surrounds us we are truly grateful.

She writes of simple things: daily practice of a morning or an evening prayer of thanks and gratitude… of thanks for ordinary moments… for the gift of Life… or prayers before leaving home each day… a focus on love of family… a threshold/doorstep prayer.

There are samples of prayers of grief: “we yield with confidence to grief, knowing that pain will pass and Love abides in us, around us and beyond us, forever and ever.”

**Common Sense**

For me, she addresses the challenges of prayer and its common sense basics:

- opening of our lives to Life’s mysteries,
- confessing our wants and needs,
- accepting the pains and frustrations, and
- saying Yes with gratitude… pointing to strength that comes in Love – in the giftedness of Life.

In all this, God-talk is just fine, but it isn’t necessary… just a cultivation of Gratitude, Yes, and focus/strength.

"Prayer does not change things. Prayer changes people and people change things."

Such a statement on the one hand is straightforward, yet it also makes certain assumptions and raises certain questions.

This statement assumes that the world needs changing and that at times we need to change. It asserts that prayer helps change us and is a valuable part of the religious life.

For many of us, this affirmation assumes a naturalistic interpretation; that is, whatever God or sacred presence exists in this world, this God works through the
laws of nature and through human hands. It asserts that we humans are partners in the ever-emerging sacred Creativity of the world. Spirit of Life, of Love... We are co-creators.

Some of us will articulate a humanism that dismisses any mention of the word prayer as archaic, and if that is your conclusion, let me say that I too have shared that view, and I have respect for it. I think of the Unitarian Susan B. Anthony who said, "I pray every single second of my life; not on my knees but with my work. My prayer is to lift women to equality with man. Work and worship are one with me. I cannot imagine a God of the universe made happy by my getting down on my knees and calling him 'great.'"

Our spiritual paths take different directions, and I do commend to you, whatever your path, some kind of discipline of the spirit: some method of centering and falling more deeply in love with life, for that is what prayer is about. And Humanist Greg Epstein’s *Good Without God* offers excellent resources.

*Obstacles to Prayer*

There is, however, another obstacle to prayer with our yearning and our doubts.

Lucy of the *Peanuts* cartoon strip is kneeling by her bedside, hands clasped in prayer. She is saying, "And I pray that I might be a better person... And that I will get even better... and better and better, and better and... That's enough."

Or, there is the Miss Peach cartoon that reflects some of us. One little girl speaks to another: "Hey, Shirley, are you still into that metaphysical stuff?" Shirley replies, "No. I used to want to be one with the universe but now we've decided to go our separate ways."

That captures so much... We are such paradoxical creatures. We want to be better and better and better and better, yet it scares us (or wearies us) sometimes, and we say enough.... But the longing remains. We are own our best friends and sometimes our own worst enemies. This fact of nature is an obstacle to prayer.

*Moving toward Wholeness*

Resources for prayer come from many places beyond what we might find on Google or in the catalogue of Books in Print or houses of worship. For example, Lily Tomlin in Broadway’s "The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe" portrays a bag lady who believes certain aliens have visited the earth in order to discover if we are an intelligent life-form. She reports about some of the findings of the aliens. What have they discovered about us?
Did you know, in the entire universe, we are the only intelligent life forms thought to have a Miss Universe contest?

Did you know, throughout the cosmos they found intelligent life forms that play [in order] to play [to have fun?] We are the only ones that play to win. Explains why we have more than our share of losers.

[Oh, they're pretty critical of us, but they said they had to admit we're way out front when it comes to stuff you can make with a blender.]

Then, she says:

I turned to 'em point blank and asked them, "Okay, you've learned a lot about us, but tell me this: What do you think of people... as a whole?"

They said they thought it would be an excellent idea.

And that too goes to the heart of the matter, doesn't it? Religions are in the business of helping us to be more whole. Some religions certainly see salvation in very different terms. They are punitive, or moralistic, or ritualistic, or irrational, so many things. Yet, honoring the religious impulse — the yearning for something more, for Life and Life Abundant — is what we are about, what healthy religion is about, and what healthy spirituality is about.

Wholeness in the face of the fact that there is so much hurt, so much pain, so much brokenness, loneliness, separation.

And prayer... appreciative awareness... meditations of breath, or mindfulness. Or centering prayers... can move us to Gratitude, Yes, and strength.

Unitarian preacher A. Powell Davies knew the "disruptiveness" and difficulty of prayer and once prayed this way:

"... the prayers that we do not want to pray, because they would commit us to hard tasks or require that we forsake our selfishness, help us to pray them. Yea, O God, more than all the others, let those be the prayers that we pray."

And I am aware for many the power of simple prayers of the heart, such as the one attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr: the Serenity Prayer well known to those in 12-step programs. "God grant us," (or for non-theists) May we find “the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

This is deeply powerful stuff, healing for many. The same wisdom is found in the prayer life of many religions around the world.

Our prayers do not change God, Nature, History, or the stars above. However, prayer and spiritual disciplines do seem to change us.
Believers and non-believers – common ground – common humanity, in humility and need for strength... common sense.

I once was one of the cautious ones about centering prayer, meditations of mindfulness, and daily gratitude as a spiritual discipline. The question where to begin is a personal matter, and I think that I began with poetry, but perhaps even before that with silence – and along the way I felt the calmness.

How to pray? Talk and listen, be honest, find time, find time, find time, confess, accept your limitations, accept your beauty, and give thanks.

Seek a deeper calm, and often you can let go, let go, let go....

When to pray? When hurting, when aching, when abused, ... when touched by joy, when proud, ... or lazy or forgetful, ... when you awake in the morning to another day's gift, when you go to bed at night, when you eat or drink....

You have no idea how to pray? You have no words? 700 years ago, Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is 'Thank you', that is enough."

Or take these simple words:

We give thanks for being.
We give thanks for being here.
We give thanks for being here together.
We give thanks for being here together this day.

Common sense....

Sappho prayed to Ishtar saying, “Save me from the sorrow that grows too bitter.” And so many others touch, heal, remind, and guide and empower.

I close with a prayer that works for me – one from W. E. B. DuBois that brings me back to myself and puts me in right relation.

"Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people change things." Let us unite in the spirit of prayer and meditation:

(Spirit of Life,) God grant us the desire to be useful - to look upon ourselves not simply as centers of pleasure and good, but rather as instruments ... for helping and cheering and doing. We would not forget,
... that great and wonderful as this... world is, it holds but dross and disappointment for them that seek simply to enjoy it. Only to those who seek life in the happiness of human souls, and in the service of ... [others] – only then and to them are the secret treasures of the world revealed. This is the lesson of life. May we learn it. Amen.

*Be here now. Give thanks*....