

## Spirit Of Life, Come Unto Me

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, May 14, 2006

What does anybody here already know or think about prayer? As I was working on this sermon, I kept struggling with the question of what I wanted you all to know or think about the idea of prayer.

One of the things that makes prayer slippery is that it's a concept we all speak of but we don't really talk about. That is, I'm apt to say to someone, "you're in my prayers, or let's pray for sunny weather, or be careful what you pray for – you might get it."

These are all ways we use the word "prayer", but what do these phrases mean to us? There is an assumption that we all mean making a request of some kind, and I think that's problematic.

So – what do you think of when you think of prayer? When you pray, if you pray, how do you pray? Do you believe in prayer as a useful act? Or does the idea of prayer kind of turn you off, as a superstitious thing to do?

I've had my own struggles with prayer, as many of us do. I don't remember when I first quit praying, but I remember why. One day, in the middle of some long pastoral prayer in some long forgotten church service, when I was a young adult, I thought, "Who the heck are we talking to? Who are we asking for all these things? What does it mean that we never seem to get quite what we ask for? What if we did get all these things? Does that mean that somebody else has less? Why should God like me better than someone else, and give me what I ask for? Why should the laws of nature be suspended to give me a break – or anyone else, for that matter?"

From then on, my prayers consisted mainly of "oh, rats, please, no" and "Wow!" I didn't think of these as prayers. I thought of them as normal human reactions to the disasters and glories of life – just emotional expressions of my fear and my awe. Occasionally, I'd "give thanks" – at a meal with family or for some kindness – but I didn't really feel in communication with God, whatever that might be.

I dissected the Lord's Prayer, which was one of the earliest formal prayers I knew, and dismissed it as archaic hyperbole, not very useful now that God was either dead or missing in action. (Now I'm inclined to think that God is a prisoner of war.)

Scholar Marcus Borg, author of *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* and *The God We Never Knew*, tells of his youthful struggle with prayer. In Borg's young mind, God was an interventionist, sticking his finger into various human scenarios, and changing things, depending on who was asking for what. He took it for granted that God was a being "out there" who could answer any prayer he felt like answering, sort of like a cosmic bellhop with an independent streak. Eventually he too discarded this concept as unworkable and quit praying for quite awhile himself.

This is a familiar turn of events to many of us. We're Unitarian Universalists because we're skeptics in many ways. We're not big on supernatural events. We're dubious about any Divine Presence who would choose our well-being over someone else's, and we're self-conscious about asking for such a thing.

Pete Wernick, a longtime Colorado friend of mine, UU, and member of the late bluegrass group Hot Rize, was on the United flight which crashed in Cedar Rapids, IA, several years ago. He and his family were unhurt, while many others died.

Pete is known to be a devout atheist and he angrily responded to the question posed by the reporter who wanted to know if his survival had made him a believer. "NO!" he thundered. "Who would believe in a God who saved me and my family and killed all those other people? Who could trust a power like that?"

And he's right, you know. Yet people continue to pray, presumably to God, a capricious and unreliable power which disappoints as often as it rewards.

Today we are trying to discover whether prayer itself has any valuable and universal application. Is prayer meaningful to us if we're unconvinced that there is any Being or Force that receives our prayer? Does it make sense to pray? Are we just talking to ourselves? Is it okay to ask for divine favor?

Theologians identify several types of prayer: intercessory prayer, contemplative prayer, prayers of thanksgiving, confession, and petition, prayers for forgiveness and for the dead. Every religious tradition has its own approach to prayer; most is ritualistic, performed by a clergy person.

I told you, moments ago, that I could remember why I stopped praying. I also remember why I started praying again, not too many years ago. In fact, I have found that prayer is now an essential piece of my spiritual life.

The prayer I experience now is far different from the prayer I used to express. Prayer used to be merely an expressed litany of requests and thanks.

"Please, God, help me do well on the test. Please, God, don't let my Dad get sick again. Thanks, God, for bringing me home safely. Thanks, God, for the unexpected good luck."

I was pretty sure God wasn't listening, directly. Though answering machines weren't much in use, in those days, it did seem like a useful bit of technology for God, in view of all the many requests and assorted communications that must cross his celestial desk daily.

I started experiencing prayer again about fifteen years ago. At the time, my Higher Power was not God, it was gravity. How do you pray to gravity? Here's what happened.

At Bandelier National Monument, in New Mexico, there is a particularly lovely trail along Frijoles Creek, leading to several ancient Indian dwellings and a restored kiva. A kiva, you may know, is a cave-like place, carved out under the floor of an Anasazi cliff village. It is only enterable through a hole in the ceiling of the kiva, down a ladder. It represents the hole that The People came through to find the Earth, according to ancient legend.

The kiva was the sanctuary, the holy place, of the people who lived in the village; sacred rituals and ceremonies took place in it and only certain persons from the village were allowed to enter the kiva.

As has happened with many ancient indigenous holy places, this kiva had been restored and opened to the public, with the permission of the Native Americans who lived in the area, so that we latter day Americans could see how our predecessors in this land had lived.

I felt a strong attraction to this beautiful canyon and its ruined dwellings and wanted to see everything I could. I also wanted to prove my strength to my companion, the fellow with whom I was exploring Bandelier.

But when we arrived at the bottom of the cliff where the kiva was located, I was taken aback. There was a series of lodgepole pine ladders leading from one cliff shelf to another, three almost vertical pitches to scale before we reached the location of the kiva.

He started scrambling up the ladders and I started considering just how badly I wanted to visit a kiva. I did want to see it, but I mostly wanted not to be a wuss. So I started up the first ladder. Not too bad. I got to the shelf and headed for ladder number 2. It was a little shorter. Again, not bad. Another shelf, and then I was at the bottom of the final ladder.

I could barely see the top of it. It seemed to reach for the very sun. Were those buzzards circling overhead in that blue New Mexico sky? A deep breath, a step, another few steps. And then the big mistake – looking back over my shoulder and down. My heart in my throat, I was paralyzed, stuck forever on a pole ladder in the middle of a cliff.

My friend peered over the edge – "you coming up?" he wondered. "Yes, just a minute," I answered. Under my breath, I said, "Please, help me make it."

And I physically found my body shifting, my weight going slightly forward, my feet planting wider, my hands clasping the ladder closer to my shoulders instead of far over my head. Suddenly I felt centered on the flimsy poles and Gravity and I finished climbing that ladder together. I felt safe, unafraid, triumphant, and relieved as I made it to the top. I knew my fear of falling had been overridden by my body's faith in gravity.

I didn't think of it as an answer to prayer. My panicky "oh, please help me make it" didn't feel quite legit.

Later I realized that the prayer that day was not just words. The prayer was also my unconscious willingness to use what my body knew about gravity to center me on that ladder. The prayer was the process I found to connect me with the forces of nature.

A few years later, I was asked to sing for the memorial service of a friend who had died suddenly. His wife asked me to sing one of his favorite songs, "River", by Bill Staines. Now "River" is a beautiful song, depicting a human life as a river in all its glory, but its words are poignant and the final verse, particularly, is hard to sing under the cheeriest of circumstances.

On that sorrowful afternoon, when we were celebrating the life of a man who died much too young, I made it through the first two verses of the song, singing of springtime waters and children's songs and love's melodies, dreading the moment when I would have to sing the hard words:

"someday when the flowers are blooming still, someday when the grass is still green, my rolling waters will round the bend and flow into the open sea. So here's to the rainbow that followed me here, and here's to the friends that I know, and here's to the song that's within me now, I will sing it where ere I go. River, take me along, in your sunshine sing me your song ever moving and winding and free, you rollin' old river, you changin' old river, let's you and me river run down to the sea."

My friend's waters had rounded the bend and had flowed into the sea unexpectedly. I didn't want him to be gone, I didn't think I could bear to sing those words of ending to his wife and his sons. I would falter and be unable to continue.

The guitarist played the few notes before the final verse and in those seconds, I looked out over the congregation and saw the face of another friend, her eyes full of tears. She began to smile at me, I took a deep breath, and I heard the song begin to sing itself. I heard my voice, I knew it was my body producing the sounds, but the song was singing itself. And I realized that my heart had connected with something in that room, and it was bearing me up, beyond my own strength and fear.

Now, I tell you these two stories in order to illustrate the shift in my thinking about prayer.

I have come to see prayer not as requests delivered to some cosmic bellhop or messages left on a celestial voice mail. I have come to see prayer as every act, every thought, every feeling that connects me with life.

Prayer does not change things, in my opinion. Prayer changes me.

My efforts to communicate with the mystery of life, my willingness to synchronize my living with the laws of nature or of God as I understand God, my gratitude for the

enormous gifts of grace that I receive, my concern for the wellbeing of others, my openness to all that life offers – all these, expressed or unexpressed, are prayer.

We Unitarian Universalists frequently resist the traditional concept of prayer. We are uncomfortable with what we consider public flaunting of a private act. We don't need miracles – well, maybe we do, but we would never pray for one, would we? It feels kind of hokey because we're self-conscious, unsure that it's reasonable behavior.

How should an atheist pray? To Whom It May Concern? And yet, in our UU hymnal, in the first 100 songs, 28 of them are prayer-like, craving a sense of connection – with something mysterious or something quite ordinary. There is an offered please and thank you. Magic words we teach our children and use ourselves with one another – and with the divine.

There is emerging evidence that prayer helps. Studies conducted by reliable research labs seem to indicate that people with illnesses or injuries who are the subject of prayer often recuperate faster and more completely. Most people are grateful when we pray for them to be able to cope with some life crisis, because they know it means we are connected, that we care.

Prayer and hope seem to me to be related. Hope to me is the conviction that I am connected to the inexhaustible source of life. Prayer is my effort to confirm that connection, to reach out and reinforce my connection to life, to the ultimate in the universe. It may be words, it may be wordless. It may be sung, danced, smiled.

Our every act can be a prayer, if it is an effort to connect with life. It may be a request for wisdom, it may be a statement of openness, it may be a conversation with the mystery. In prayer, we connect with the personality of the universe, whether we call it God or our deepest Self. We reveal our brokenness, our true nature, we ask for guidance, we ask for forgiveness, we ask for strength, for courage, for healing.

When we sing our prayer, "Spirit of life, come unto me," we are opening our hearts and minds to the beauty and grandeur and challenges of all life, acknowledging our need for greater wisdom, giving thanks for the roots and wings which enable us to grow, to expand our awareness, and to give back some of the many gifts we have received.

Is it any wonder that human beings pray, whether to a definable God or to the mystery of the universe or to our deepest selves? There is so much to discover, so much to be thankful for, so much to mourn. And when we pray, we open ourselves to the greater power available. We may not be able to say where it comes from; we may be inarticulate when we try to describe it.

But we are heard, for when we are open to wisdom, we receive it. When we express compassion, we are blessed. When we pray for strength and courage, our fear diminishes and we are healed.

I invite you to pause now for a moment of spoken and silent prayer.

Spirit of Life and Love and Truth, we offer our open hearts and minds today. We seek wisdom, we seek courage and strength. We ask for healing for those who are ill or injured or unhappy. We ask for a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. We ask for guidance as we learn to be fully human.

We are grateful for this beautiful planet; we ask forgiveness for the destructive ways we have used it. We are grateful for our friends and loved ones; we ask forgiveness for the harm we may have done them. We ask life's blessings upon this gathered community, upon those who have joined our community today; we ask for clarity as we explore our mission together.

And we ask that we might be a force for good in this world, reaching out to help others in need of justice, in need of food, in need of friendship. Let the Spirit of Life and Love and Truth shine out from our lives and from this congregation. May it be so.

Our closing hymn is #123, Spirit of Life.

### ***Benediction***

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that every act which connects us with life is an act of prayer. May we be always aware of the value of our lives and of the importance of being always in communication with the earth and the community around us. And may we seek to offer that sense of value and importance to others. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.