

A History of Prayer
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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Before his death in 1327, the theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart had this to say about the subject of the sermon today: “If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life was ‘Thank You,’ that would suffice.” It’s a fascinating statement which, though uttered at the height of what we call the Middle Ages, sounds remarkably fresh, generous, and wise. Perhaps that’s all that really needs to be said about prayer; that some time in our lives, we earnestly say those two words: “thank you.” Surely, all of us have said *that*; and if that’s the case, why don’t I just say: “thus endeth the sermon, and let’s go home.” That would be *one* way to bring this service to a close; it may even have delighted someone like that medieval mystic Meister Eckhart who was hauled before the Inquisition and tried as a heretic.

However, I suspect that more needs to be said; and indeed, Eckhart’s reasoned defense of his beliefs before the Inquisition comprised a lot more than just saying “thank you.” This sermon will be far briefer than his defense before the church courts, but we have some ground to cover—so here we go...I’m going to talk about three things: 1) describe where prayer comes from and what it is; 2) give a short history of prayer as experienced in the life of one person I know fairly well; and, 3) explore how something like prayer can be understood, appreciated and practiced by all of us, whether we are young or veterans, believers or non-believers, mystics or atheists.

Prayer. A complicated and dynamic interior world belongs to every human person. Here that we grapple with our experiences, struggle with questions and the responses we will make to them with our lives—responses that will contribute to shaping what the world will be for ourselves and others. I think that this rich subjective world is something we share with the

human family across cultures and time. To be sure, the ways in which we think and feel and publicly express our interior lives are as diverse as human culture—from our hunting gathering days to agricultural and post industrial civilizations. But all of us have been and are in relationships to the natural world, to other human beings, and to the very source and ground of existence—what Unitarians call that transcending mystery and wonder which creates and upholds life. These relationships give meaning to our experience; they attune our hearts and minds to the deepest dimensions of reality.

But our attention wanders; our spirituality stagnates; we drift along. And then something, perhaps some painful event—sickness, loss of work, a crisis in a relationship—jolts us and demands a meaningful response. Or we realize that we have become dull to the beauty and mystery of the people and nature around us. We look up and find ourselves in a place that mocks our peace of mind, our deepest longings. And drifting through life is no longer possible—we are compelled to acknowledge the persistent yearning, the pull to a new and different way of living; and nagging, unavoidable questions arise: what do we really need to bring peace and joy back into our lives? How are we to proceed? For what are we living? What does it mean to be a fully human person? Struggle, growth and transformation are then our reality, and we become alert to our spirituality.

Redeeming the routine of daily life, responding with praise to its splendor, entreating the depths within us or the heavens beyond for some way to solve intractable dilemmas, figuring out how to choose and carry our commitments that give and support life—these human needs and deeds provoke and give shape to the near universal and audacious practice we call prayer. Our word “prayer” comes from the Latin verb *precare*, which means to beg, or entreat—a form of

earnest, direct address to god or the gods, especially in the form of petition or praise expressed privately or publicly by an individual or groups of people.

Students of religion call prayer the very essence and soul of religion, and that probably nothing is more central to religion than praying. John Haught in his classic study of religion wrote that praying “is the act...in which religion becomes concretely real. Aside from prayer,” he says, “religion [for the most part] is an abstract notion... Its ritual formulas, creeds, temples and churches are mere shells unless they are animated by acts of prayer addressed to mystery.”

(John F. Haught, *What is Religion?: An Introduction*, 1990, see pp. 251-55. On the four types of prayer below, see Haught , pp. 252-5)

He notes, and with good reason, that the viability and genuineness of prayer are susceptible to withering scrutiny and skepticism. Isn't it just a conversation with ourselves? Isn't it childish to try to bend the heavens to pay attention to me, to us? And if prayer is supposed to work, why does it appear that so few are really answered? These questions are certainly valid, but it's also interesting to note that a lot of research data shows that people who say they are non-religious and even atheistic nevertheless pray. So what's going on with prayer, and when we're praying? Praying can be an unpremeditated outburst of an enduring human need, a call for help, with hope attending it—the trust that, in some way, by some means, there will be a response to our petition, or to our earnest words of praise.

In the context of many public religions, we can see at least four types of prayer; let's call them sacramental, mystical, non objective, and activist. I'm going to describe each briefly in turn, then turn to a personal account of the story of prayer, and finish up with an exploration of something like prayer that may be relevant and applicable to any of us.

We have *sacramental* forms of prayer in religions; rituals that celebrate communal life, ideals and identity. Its expression is dramatic; where we act out the conviction that individuals and the community are related to one another and the ultimate mystery of life; and its *content* is

thanksgiving and petition. For example, we light a chalice flame with words of in-gathering, entreaties for peace and understanding, and expressions of praise. We bless and dedicate infants and welcome them into our community; we bridge our older children and youth into adolescence and young adulthood with blessings and petitions for strength and wisdom, and with promises that we will walk with them.

A second kind of prayer is *mystical*—a quest for an experience of union with the divine mystery. Instead of drama, which requires community, symbols and story, mystical prayer tends to be singular; the person seeks union with the divine that would erase the distance between the individual and the ground of her being. She does not consciously entreat for *things*—not for community, blessings, or power to weather life transitions; rather, the intent here is to experience the kind of awe we feel when contemplating the immensity and mystery of life and the cosmos; and desire only that it would last. For many of us, three minutes of meditation on a Sunday morning may not be enough; it may however, open a door and indicate a way to practice and experience mystical prayer.

A third expression of prayer is *non-objective*; the theological word for it is *apophatic*. It is a kind of silent prayer that strives to get beyond the use of mental or artistic images and stories that represent or connect with the divine because it is so radically different than we and our world. Approaching *that*—whether it's the laws of nature, or the creative source transcending all things in this kind of earnest prayer is by the path of negation, by letting go of means of expressing it. A weird example of this is in the Harry Potter stories, where people mention something by saying that it will not be mentioned: “he who cannot be named,” they say with fear and dread. Think, perhaps instead—a better example—of a Zen monk in a bare room practicing

sitting meditation, where the point is emptying the mind of all objective images and thought, and we get a notion of the this third kind of prayer.

A fourth type of prayer to be found in religious practice is *activist* prayer—where action itself is the way to redeem, entreat, praise, connect and respond to mystery and wonder. That surely, was a path advocated by prophetic women and men in religions who, through word and deed, emphasized the doing of justice as a supreme form of prayer, as a call and response to the divine. For them, and here someone like Martin Luther King Jr. springs to mind, a person jolts himself out of routine and estrangement from life through active worship, where prayer and devotion are not to be found chiefly in rituals, contemplation or silence, but in love of one's neighbour and in on-going confrontation of "powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transformative power of love."

Struck with awe for the beauty of the world, gripped by fear, vexed by dilemmas and questions, tired with routine, yearning for communion, glad at heart, wracked with doubt, thirsting to pierce the surface veil of things to stand directly before the abiding wonder and mystery of it all...welling up from that complicated, dynamic world within, who of us, at some time in our lives hasn't groped for those words or feelings beyond words that would express the soul's sincere desire; approached that deep place with petition, entreaty, praise, and thanks?

Ah, but then the nagging doubts arise, the mindful objections, the heavens stony in their silence; prayers uttered in judgment against us and others, prayers abused and abused as weapons in the arsenal of the godly...and it can become an impossible thing to perform. William James, the great psychologist and philosopher of religion, once said that prayer is the very essence and soul of religion; but that he could not pray. This god haunted man, who knew something

intimately about religious experience and the absence of god, said he could not pray: I feel foolish and artificial every time I try.

Perhaps you will recognize something of your own story, and the history of prayer, in what follows. I grew up in a world where prayer, both private and public, was as common and taken-for-granted part of life as sitting down to eat, going off to school, or playing with my friends. Grace at meals, bed-time prayers, prayers of praise and supplication in church meetings, prayers of healing in times of sickness, to bless a new-born infant, at times of baptism and confirmation and weekly communion—I was born into a world at prayer; accompanied by an unseen but present and very personal deity who knew me, cared for me, and who—if addressed sincerely, earnestly—would hear, accept, understand and respond.

But then I began to notice things: there was no praying in my public school and no prayers on TV (this was before cable). I began to observe that some people were more prayerful than others, my parents included. And then I started to read about history and geography, about wars of religion and civil wars; wars where, in Lincoln's words: "both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other...The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes." And step by step, that-taken-for-granted world of prayer into which I was born began to fall apart; whole domains of life, it seemed, lay outside it; and its purpose, the persons who offered them, the object to whom they were addressed—all became ambiguous, questionable, unseemly. And then, in my first year of university, I read Richard Rubinstein's *After Auschwitz*—and it was as if a door closed irrevocably. If *their* prayers, in such extremity and dire need, were not, could not be answered...how could I possibly go on as if this had nothing to do with me, with my religious life, and my way of being in the world? With exceedingly rare

exceptions, a certain kind of prayer for me was no longer possible; and that being who once was seemingly so near and personal withdrew forever.

But the “soul’s sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed”...that endures nevertheless, does it not? Words and feelings of gratitude and praise still abide and well up inside and cannot help but rise in my heart and to my lips—for there *are* blessings, there *is* such beauty not of my making in this world for which the words “**thank you**” *truly suffice*; and I cannot help but say them—and it’s fitting and right to do so. But to whom, or to what are these words addressed?—to the good people in our lives; to their goodness, their faithfulness, loyalty and service; their struggles, hopes, joys and concerns; to our bonds of affection and mutual responsibility—we can say “**thank you.**” And on this day of equinox, of Ostara—to the earth and the rush of sap in spring, the year that throws forth the seed for begetting, for the pulse and body of the soil, for the rhythm of life; for the equipoise of planets, the motion of the heavens, and the power and laws which govern and animate them, and make our seasons, and life itself possible—we can say “**thank you.**”

And when thank yous are not the words that need to be said, when the earth quakes and a tidal wave devastates, and when despots oppress and people and life suffer, the soul’s sincere desire wells up nonetheless, and god-fearing or no, hearts reach out and entreat, while thoughts’ petitions outstrip the bonds of space: blessing, healing, freedom, peace, comfort, ceasefire, an end to torment and suffering—and in all these, whether it is gratitude or beseeching, we displace ourselves from the center of attention and care, and we re-discover or remember—even if but for a moment—the humanity, the worth, beauty and dignity of others, our dependence upon them and the earth, and that sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands. And in

those moments of prayerfulness, that complicated and dynamic interior world that belongs to each comes more fully and deeply alive.

Perhaps you saw something of yourself in this story of prayer; or maybe not. It may have been a bit too dramatic and overwrought...in which case, you may find a final story useful; I did, and not only as a sermon closer. There are times when we just need some help; we can't go to god—don't believe in her; Nature's too impersonal; friends and others just can't offer what's needed, and we've come to an impasse—can't kick an addiction, can't finish an assignment, can't settle a dispute, can't make up your mind—where should I live, what should I do, how am I going to end this story, song, or sermon.

Years ago, Tom Waits, the great American song writer was stuck in eight lanes of traffic in Los Angeles, when a beautiful fragment of a song came into his head. He didn't have a pencil to write it down, and no recording equipment. He immediately began to feel the pressure—I'm not good enough; I can't do it; I'm going to lose it; it's going to haunt me forever. Suddenly, he just started to negotiate with it out loud. He looked up into the sky, and said: "Excuse me, can't you see I'm driving? If you're serious about wanting to exist, listen: I spend eight hours a day in the recording studio—you're welcome to come and visit me while I'm sitting at the piano—otherwise, leave me alone and go and bother Leonard Cohen."

On other occasions Waits has been seen marching up and down the street, talking out loud to a tune that just won't come. He wants it for the closing song for an album that's all but finished. And so he talks to it directly: "Look, the rest of the family is in the car; we're all going on vacation; are you coming along or not? You've got ten minutes, or else you're going to be left behind." And that melody comes to his mind; he dashes to piano, and finishes the album.

(I heard this story on a *Radiolab* podcast called "Help!", see *Radiolab*, March 8, 2011)

Now I don't care whether we're going to call this prayer, or not. But what I got from it is that, whether we want to call ourselves religious, spiritual, agnostic or atheist, *it just is the case* that there are times (and there are countless examples from human cultures) when help seemingly comes to us as if from outside our own heads. The point of the story, for me is this: we've got to show that we're serious—we punch the clock at the recording studio; we chain ourselves to the desk; we brood, think, and feel. And then maybe, we just have to be crazy enough to talk to it, to negotiate with it, to ask it questions, to let it know that we're there and will give it the kind of attention and affection that it needs to come forth. That "it" may be a melody; or it may be the strength we need to overcome an addiction, or the solution to a problem, or the final words that will bring a sermon to a close. And if it reveals itself—do not fail to say: "thank you, I will use you well; I give you my blessing; please come again; I'll never forget you."

There are times when, in order to solve the mysteries and needs that dwell within us, we have to journey outside ourselves—a journey that looks something very much like prayer.

The last chapter in the history of prayer has not yet been written. As long as there are human beings with thoughts, and hopes, dreams and needs, and who walk in beauty and community, there will be no end to prayer.