

Prayer: An Alternative View

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True prayer is deliberately putting ourselves at God's disposal.
—Harry Emerson Fosdick

Prayer is the act of bringing our moment-by-moment connectedness to God into our consciousness... Prayer opens us to God's presence... and thus shifts our ability to receive whatever guidance is appropriate for ourselves and the communities of which we are a part. —Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki

Ancient Witness: Romans 8:26-27

Someone calls you and asks that you pray for them. What do you do? You may be set off to wonder about the meaning and efficacy of prayer.

There's an old story of a mild-mannered minister who accepted the call to a church in Kentucky where many of the members bred horses, and sometimes raced them. A few weeks after he arrived, he was asked to invite prayers of the congregation for Lucy Gray. Willingly and gladly he did so for three weeks. On the fourth Sunday one of the elders told him that he need not do it any longer.

“Why?” asked the minister with an anxious look. “Has she died?”

“Oh no,” replied the elder. “She won the steeplechase yesterday.”

You know, there are many thoughtful, thinking people of faith who don't know what to do with prayer. Many progressive people want to pray, but the only kind of praying they've seen doesn't really mesh with their understanding of reality. And faith in the scientific age requires new models of God and new models of prayer, it seems to me.

One way that we might be different from another church down the street is that we affirm there is no one correct way to pray. We affirm the variety of ways that people view prayer. But if you wonder about prayer and want alternatives, I offer these thoughts to you.

“Help me...Give me...”

Throughout the sacred texts of the Christian tradition, you will find the importance of praying is stressed. “Be constant in prayer,” wrote Paul, “pray at all times in the spirit.” Of course, there are many who do not consciously pray on a regular basis. Yet, most people do pray. In his book, *Uncommon Prayer*, Kenneth Swanson wrote,

For someone of faith, the habitual response to any personal inadequacy is to pray. This kind of prayer almost always begins with the words, “Help me...” No situation is too mundane; it can be muttered while struggling to balance a checkbook, breathed upon entering a room full of strangers, murmured on the tennis court.

For many, this kind of prayer is woven into the regular pattern of living or working. This is the prayer that often escapes the lips of people who seldom pray. It happens when inadequacy has given way to powerlessness, helplessness or desperation. It may come as the involuntary cry, "O God!" as the car skids out of control. Or it may come out of the agony of having to cope with a business disaster, a shattered relationship, or a terminal illness. It is often spoken on behalf of another, usually a loved one, yet surprisingly, often for acquaintances, or even strangers who are in trouble.

Once a crisis is over, most people no longer feel a need to pray. In the film, "The End," Burt Reynolds plays a character who has been told that he has a terminal illness. Unable to bear the thought of a slow, painful death, he decides to kill himself. Yet whenever he finds himself caught in the middle of a suicide plan, he changes his mind. How he escapes from each suicide plan, once in motion, provides the film's comic momentum. At one point he decides to swim away from the California coast until the shoreline is no longer visible, and then drown himself. Once far offshore, though, he has the usual lack of courage. Swimming furiously back toward the shoreline, with each stroke he sputters the prayer, "God, if you help me get to shore, I'll give you fifty percent of everything I own..." Reaching the shore, exhausted, lying face down in the sand, he pants, "Thanks, God. I won't forget that ten percent."

Swanson writes that prayer that is an honest expression of need and vulnerability, that begins with "help me," is legitimate on one level, of course. Just take a look at the Psalms and you can see that. But to many progressive people of faith, we no longer see the Divine Presence as something that intervenes and overrides the laws of physics. And there is another kind of prayer that begins with "give me," the kind Janis Joplin made fun of in her song:

*O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porches; I must make amends.*

Sometimes people who pray this way look upon God as a kind of Santa Claus or fairy godmother in the sky.

"Make me..."

Harry Emerson Fosdick, that great liberal preacher at Riverside Church in New York City, in the 1920's, said in his classic book, *The Meaning of Prayer*,

Childishness in prayer is chiefly evidenced in an overwhelming desire to beg things from God, and in a corresponding failure to desire above all else the friendship of God. The same growth ought to take place in our relationship with God which occurs in a normal relationship of a child and [its] parents...The child grows, through desiring things from its parents, into love of the parents for their own sakes...we tend to grow out of crying to God, "Give me..." and into the deeper prayer, "Make me..."

Prayer, according to Fosdick, is chiefly communion with God. "The great gift of God in prayer is God, and whatever else God gives is incidental and secondary," he wrote.

It is safe to say that over 90 percent of all personal prayer falls into the “Help me...” or “Give me...” categories. The irony is that this is not at all what the Bible, or the great Christian saints, understood as the primary motive of prayer. Jesus said, “I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly.” The abundant life...has to do with a quality of living found solely in an intimate relationship with God.

In a little town in the French Pyrenees where there’s a shrine celebrated for miracles of healing. There’s a story that one day shortly after World War II, and amputee veteran appeared there. As he hobbled up to the shrine, someone remarked, “That silly man! Does he think God will give him back his leg?” The veteran, overhearing, turned and replied, “Of course I do not expect God to give me back my leg. I am going to pray to God to help me live without it.”

To enter an intimacy with God, we grow past crying to God, “Give me...” and into the deeper prayer, “Make me...” “True prayer,” said Fosdick, “is deliberately putting ourselves at God’s disposal.”

Another way of saying this is that God is connected to us and all things at every moment, and prayer is the act of bringing this connectedness to God into our awareness. In prayer we open ourselves to God’s desire for the well-being of all, including ourselves, and we join ourselves to this desire.

Letting God Pray In Us

How then, can we pray? Paul wrote in the eighth chapter of Romans, “We don’t know how we ought to pray.” This admission is a good place to start.

It is almost as if Paul is saying, “Join the crowd. We all have the same problem. The answer is not to find someone who will teach you how to pray. The answer to our problem is to let go of our desire to pray and let God pray in us.” In prayer, according to Paul, “The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” We don’t pray, but rather *we let prayer happen in us*. We let God shine through us; we let goodness, peacefulness, joy, compassion radiate through us.

I heard Richard Rohr say once that the church has turned prayer almost exclusively into a *verbal thing* instead of a *state of consciousness*.

*The prayer of words attempts to express our dependence on the great mystery of God.
The prayer of silence is not so much to express, but to experience that dependence.*

And so prayer in its deepest sense is to open oneself to a new state of consciousness. It is not so much speaking as it is listening. And so there are the prayers of Mary and Jesus, which are about surrender and openness. Mary: “Let it be to me according to your spirit.” Jesus: “Not my will, but thy will.” Rohr describes this level of prayer not as a “willful concentration” but a “willing receptivity.” Not will-*full*-ness, but a will-*ing*-ness.

What Is Changed In Prayer?

So, what are we saying when we pray for someone who is sick? Are we trying to make God more compassionate and caring? I don’t think so. When we say, “Be with this person,” are we

saying that God is not always lovingly present to that person (and to every person, for that matter)? I don't think so.

In his book, *When Children Ask About God*, Rabbi Harold Kushner addresses what changes during prayer:

Late one evening, my phone rang. "Rabbi, my mother is going in for an operation tomorrow. Would you say a prayer for her?" Can I really believe that the words I recite will have an influence on the recovery of a woman I have never met, a woman who doesn't know of my existence, let alone my prayers on her behalf? More than that, can I believe in a God who has the power to cure a sick person but who will exercise that power only if we recite the right words at the right time in the right language, a God who will let a person die if, in our confusion, we forget the prayer or get the words wrong?

"Oh God, please cure her!" is not really a request, much as it sounds like one. It is a cry of pain, an expression of helplessness, of the finiteness of human wisdom in the face of illness and death. God "answers" such a cry not by sending a miraculous recovery, but by giving the one who cries out enough strength to bear his burden, however heavy it has become. I usually respond to requests like the one made of me that evening by saying, "I'll pray for your mother's recovery, so that you and she will know that a community is with you and hopes things turn out well for you. And I hope you will pray, too. Not just for recovery. Pray that you'll be strong enough and your mother and all your family will be strong enough to take whatever comes, without being broken by it. Pray that, if things turn out well, you'll remember to be grateful and appreciate life and health more. Pray that you find comfort in the knowledge that skilled, dedicated doctors and nurses—strangers to you—are working to make her better, because God has given them minds to understand and hearts to care about the pain of a fellow human being. If you can find comfort in the fact that you have done everything you could do and the doctors are doing everything they can, if you are strong enough to accept the worst and be humbly grateful for anything better, then your prayers will have been answered."

One progressive alternative view is that when we pray, we open ourselves to God's transforming Spirit. If we pray for someone who is sick, for example, perhaps God's Spirit makes us slightly more loving toward that person. And if the praying helps us to better demonstrate and radiate this love, then this person might also experience this as healing.

Kushner says that only when we pray for a change *within ourselves* do we have a chance of getting a response to our prayer. Prayer is a *commitment to being changed*, radically, at a deep level, where intimacy resides.

In his book, *Praying for Jennifer*, theologian John Cobb explores prayer through a story that he has written. Near the end, one of the characters says this:

As youths we used to sing that God has no hands but our hands and no feet but our feet. I think that's true. God works in and through creatures, not like another more powerful creature alongside us. If we creatures refuse to do what God calls us to do, God's purposes won't be accomplished. That may be frightening. But I think it's true.

If God creates in and through us, then prayer is a kind of partnership with God, an openness to change and conform to God's purposes. And so I'll conclude with a very old short story.

There once was a student of a Desert Master, who complained bitterly: "I have prayed fervently and repeatedly for the condition of the poor beggar at the gate, and God has not answered my prayers!"

"But that is not true," said the master. "God has sent you."

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Further Reading:

Cobb, John. *Praying for Jennifer: An Exploration of Intercessory Prayer in Story Form.*

Fosdick, Harry Emerson. *The Meaning of Prayer.* A classic.

Fox, Matthew. *On Becoming a Musical Mystical Bear.*

Rohr, Richard. *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer.*

Suchocki, Marjorie. *In God's Presence.* An alternative perspective from a process theologian. Highly recommended.

Ulanov, Barry and Ann. *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer.*