

An Attitude of Prayer
Sermon by Kent Hemmen Saleska
Candidating Week – First Service
UU Church of Minnetonka
Sunday, April 29, 2007

First Reading: Exodus 19:16-19

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

Second Reading: Mark 14:32-42

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping [but] once more he went away and prayed the same thing.

Third Reading: *Call to Worship*
By Victoria Safford

What if there were a universe, a cosmos, which began in shining blackness, out of nothing, out of fire, out of a single, silent breath, and into it came billions and billions of stars, stars beyond imagining, and near one of them a world, a blue-green world so beautiful that the learned clergyman could not even speak about it cogently, and brilliant scientists, with their physics, their mathematics, their empirical, impressionistic musing, in trying to describe it, would begin to sound like poets?

What if there were a universe in which a world was born out of a smallish star, and into that world (at some point) flew red-winged blackbirds, and into it swam sperm whales, and into it bloomed crocuses, and into it blew wind to lift the tiniest hairs on naked arms in spring, and into it as some point grew onions, out of soil, and in went Mt. Everest and also the coyote we've spotted in the woods about a mile from here, just after sunrise on these mornings when the moon is full? Into that world came animals and elements and plants, and imagination, the mind and the mind's eye. If such a universe existed and you noticed it, what would you do? What song would come out of your mouth, what prayer, what praises, what sacred offering, what whirling dance, what religion and what reverential gesture would you make to greet that world, every single day you were in it?

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When I was eight years old, shortly before my family began to attend a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I remember sitting in church one Sunday when the minister asked us to bow our heads in prayer. So I diligently followed the example of my parents and bowed my head. I did not know to whom I was talking, or what to ask for. When I peeked at the people around me, some simply sat still with their eyes closed. Others swayed slightly while silently moving their lips. I got nervous. Time was running out. Then I remembered one other time in my life when I was supposed to close my eyes and ask for something: my birthday! So, with deepest sincerity, I closed my eyes again, bowed my head, and prayed that all the automobiles and airplanes and even our houses would turn to chocolate.

My understanding of and attitude toward prayer did not change much in the next 30 years. I get silent reflection. I appreciate meditation. And I certainly understand when Mary Oliver writes:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?"¹

But I didn't get, and had a vague irritation with public prayer in church, or at weddings and funerals, or even during interfaith social justice gatherings.

For many years, because I was a good Unitarian Universalist (that is, because I gracefully tolerated the superstitious ways of others), I might bow my head during the prayer and silently endure the praise or petition of a distant God with whom I felt no connection and in whom I did not believe.

This year though, I've been faced with a challenge. In September 2005, I began work as a Chaplain Resident at Methodist Hospital in Minneapolis. The Department of Spiritual Care at the hospital includes eight full-time chaplains, four on-call chaplains, a volunteer Jewish chaplain, and an on-call priest. In addition, five of us Chaplain Residents and our supervisor make up the 12-month Clinical Pastoral Education – or "CPE" – program. My supervisor and resident colleagues are all quite liberal, and include a Lutheran woman, a lay Catholic man, a woman from the United Church of Christ, and an ordained Episcopal Priest.

CPE uses an action-reflection-action model of learning. We visit patients of all religions, genders, ages and races, then three times a week we meet in our Residency group to reflect on our experiences – then we go back and visit more people. In this process, we not only encounter patients and fellow group members who irritate and annoy us, we are also invited to enter more deeply into our irritation and annoyance, into our frustration, into our anger, into the anxiety and pain and fear underneath the anger, into our own hearts and souls to explore the darkness at the

¹ From Mary Oliver's poem, "The Summer's Day," from her 1992 book, *New and Selected Poems*.

source. The theory is that the more we know about our shadow side, the less likely we are to feel ambushed and off-balance when we encounter it with other people. The result, and I have experienced this repeatedly, is that we are able to be more present with people in the midst of *their* pain. One condition though is that while called to be present with others in their pain, we are also challenged to engage a presence authentic to our own theology – because if our theology is unable to engage the real world, then it is a useless theology.

In my own darkness, I am uncovering deep roots of shame and a Beast who enjoys telling me I am stupid and incapable. In my shadow side, I also continue to encounter resistance to prayer....though as you might guess, prayer is a huge part of a Chaplain job description!

While writing this sermon, I shared with my colleagues that I was going to present a sermon on prayer to a UU congregation and wanted a stunning title. After recovering from their feigned shock, my UCC friend suggested: “Prayer: the REAL weapon of mass destruction!” When I said that *might* not be my approach, my Episcopalian friend then suggested, “UU Prayer: Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

Well, I’ve come to appreciate a phrase I’ve heard sometimes in UU churches that goes something like this: “I invite you to join me now in an attitude of prayer.” For those of us who may be resistant to the idea or practice of prayer, this phrase invites an approach that says, “I don’t believe in this crap, but I can go along with an attitude – I can certainly close my eyes and pretend to *look* like I’m praying.” For those of us who may find more resonance in a prayerful practice, “an attitude of prayer” suggests an orientation toward balance, centering and connection.

When I am honest, I realize that most of my life I’ve been less than generous towards people who pray. I was especially cynical about statements of faith or rote prayers that seemed mechanical in their re-telling. But two hospital experiences this year urged me to explore the purpose and meaning of prayer more deeply.

One day I visited Lucille, a Methodist woman who was admitted with what appeared to be a stroke. Her two daughters were also present. Lucille told me she hoped her stroke wasn’t serious, that she was worried about hospital expenses, and that she sang in her church choir. Then came the dreaded question: she asked me to pray for her. I looked down, shifted from foot to foot, and said haltingly:

Gracious God, we ask for health for Lucille in this time of uncertainty so that she may find renewed strength...and, um, for a stability in her finances to help her pay for her hospital stay...and, ah, continued support from her family as they are showing here tonight (*pause*). We also ask for continued joy and strength from the music she loves so much (*long pause as I couldn’t think of anything else to say*). Amen.

Leaving the room, my Beast of shame attacked me and I felt like an idiot. Saying “Gracious God” was better than saying “Dear Lord,” but I just *knew* they were suspicious of me because of all my stumbling. I don’t believe in a male God, so I couldn’t end in “His” name, and I believe spirituality is bigger than Jesus, so I couldn’t end by saying “in Jesus name.” So I just said “Amen” and got out fast.

In the midst of writing up that visit to discuss with my CPE group, I visited Glen. Glen was 74, nearly deaf, and had an advanced case of Parkinson’s. I asked a few “yes” or “no” questions but our visit was mostly in silence. Glen could think clearly but could barely get those thoughts into words. His eyes, though, were very expressive and it seemed he wanted to say so

much more. Finally, I saw him struggle to formulate a word. I bent over him and heard him say “prayer.” “You want me to say a prayer?” I asked. Then he responded: “Lord’s Prayer.” “You want me to say the Lord’s Prayer?” I asked. He nodded. I took his left hand in my right hand, leaned very close over him, and looked directly into his eyes, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

During the prayer, Glen looked steadily back into my eyes, spoke without a tremor, and remembered every word. Water gathered in his eye as we recited together, and by the end of the prayer a tear rolled down the side of Glen’s face.

I could not, for the life of me, figure out why this rote prayer, this prayer I do not recite in my personal life, this prayer dripping with paternal hierarchy, this prayer whose only connection and meaning for me is rooted in childhood Sunday school memory, this prayer which, unlike my first attempt with spontaneous prayer when I felt like an idiot afterward, hit me on this day with the emotional force of a punch to the chest. I was flustered. I did not feel a sense of conversion. I did not feel I was speaking to a supernatural God. But this prayerful experience of profound emotional connection left me confused and flustered.

I needed to just let go for a while. In prayer with patients, I did not censor or nuance my words, but used all the traditional “God” and “Jesus” words. It felt uncomfortable, and I knew I wouldn’t use those words forever. But I needed to let go of my resistance before I could return to my own authenticity.

In my prayer with patients, I began to notice two main themes. The first is that prayer is primarily a time set aside to recognize connection: certainly with other humans, but also in an intimate and intentional way with the vastness and varieties of all existence. The second thing, which was more surprising to me, is that my exploration of prayer pushes me to deepen my own liberal faith. Prayer, I discovered, is not a requirement of faith. Prayer is an attitude and a practice that arises *out* of faith. So what then, is my faith?

To be authentic in prayer, I could not ignore my humanist and naturalistic mystic tendencies. I do not use “Christ” language in prayers because those words are unique to Christianity, and I do not claim Christianity as my faith tradition. But “God” is another story.

Of course I’ve encountered fundamentalist Christians who like to tell us what God thinks and where God lives. My liberal Chaplain colleagues are as frustrated and angry with those fundamentalists as I am. But one day in group I began ranting about how I didn’t believe God had genitals, about how I didn’t believe God had intentions – bad or good – for us humans, and in fact, I didn’t believe in God at all and I would appreciate it if they would all just stop using the “God” word around me, thank you very much. If God did exist, I thought it would be bigger and more complex than any of us could know, we would barely have a clue about what God intended, and I doubted that one small handful of our human realm on this hunk of rock circling a minor star in a backwater spiral of one single galaxy would hold sole possession of ultimate truth about this unknowable being. “I only use the word ‘God’ around you,” I told them, “so

maybe you'll understand what I'm saying. But using language like that is not my native tongue. I feel like I always have to translate my beliefs. I know what I mean if I use the word 'God,' but I get very nervous when other people use it."

After a pause, my friend the Episcopalian priest looked at me calmly and said, "So you don't trust anyone else with the metaphor of God?"

Well. I didn't know what to say. I sat in silence for a long time and the group sat with me. I didn't trust anyone else with the metaphor of God? That didn't make sense. Or did it? Why did someone else saying the word "God" make me feel nervous or irritated? My resistance to hearing "God" from other people comes from a lack of trust in how other religious people use it. But I realized that when I get irritated about "God" language, I am playing a role of victim. The liberal and progressive Christians in my group had never attacked or hurt me, yet I was retaliating against them. I was allowing fundamentalists to steal an acceptable word and bash me over the head with it. I realized that my irritation with prayer was partly the result of my own lack of clarity and comfort with my beliefs.

Then I remembered my seminary class in Hebrew Scripture. In those old stories, God is described through many metaphors: as a shepherd protecting sheep, as a potter shaping souls, as steadfast as a rock, as "the bread of life" that will satisfy our spiritual hunger, as a comforter in times of pain, as a healer in times of sickness, as a creator in whose image all existence is created, even as a mother hen protecting chicks under her wing and as a mother giving birth and gathering her children into her arms.

These images, these metaphors, are attempts to name the unnamable. But no matter how we come at it, our naming always falls short. This is not a failure of Judaism or Christianity. Rather, these descriptions are an example of humanity's ongoing attempts to relate with a larger existence. These attempts remind me of the opening phrases of the Tao te Ching: "The Tao that can be spoken of is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. Having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; having a name, it is the Mother of all things."

If such a universe as ours existed and we noticed it, "What song would come out of your mouth, what prayer, what praises, what sacred offering, what whirling dance, what religion and what reverential gesture would you make to greet that world, every single day you were in it?" What if, in a liberal religious attempt to name the unnamable, "God" is understood as the forces of shaping and creating, from DNA, gravity and quarks to parenting, poetry and imagination? And what if engaging in prayer is understood as an intentional awareness, connection and conversation with all those forces of shaping and creativity?

In Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter story after story of God in conversation with humanity. But by the time of Christian Scriptures, dialogue between God and humans no longer exists. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we hear only a one-sided prayer from Jesus saying to the universe, "Everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I want, but what you will." I believe this is not a story about Jesus being alone, but a story that recognizes known and unknown forces in the universe, most of which are beyond human control. The universe will do what the universe does; the only control we have is how we respond.

I believe that the story of Jesus is the story of the universe: it is a story of existence becoming aware of itself. As Christian terminology suggests, Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. I believe Jesus in Gethsemane is one attempt to tell the story of how Jesus, as both a human and as a metaphor for all existence, is no longer separate from God. It is a story about how creator and creation are one.

If the story of the universe were compressed into a 12-month calendar year, humans appeared only in the last few minutes of the last day of December. If we understand God to encompass all the forces that shape and create the universe, then when we look into the darkened sky at night and see stars and far off galaxies, you and I are the eyes of God seeing ourselves for the first time. You and I are the ears of God, hearing the cries and songs of a universe being born. If I really understand metaphor, that is, with one concept described as *equal to* a second concept, then I accept the poetic flow between “God” and “Universe.” In the story of the universe, the universe *is* the body of God. In the story of the Universe, we humans are not the most prominent creatures, nor are we the most evolved, nor are we the end product. But we are vital and inextricably interwoven members of a continuum. We are not creatures who live *in* the universe. We are expressions *of* the universe.

In this spirit, understanding that we are both agents and inheritors of shaping and creative forces, I invite you to join with me in an attitude of prayer:

Creative God, Spirit of Life,
we come here today as we come every Sunday
to recognize and be reminded
of the relationships inherent in our existence.
In our communion, we honor the awareness
that humanity is a part of nature,
that we creatures of earth emerged
as a result of a continuous process.
We also know there are many times in our lives
when we walk through
the Valley of the Shadow of Death,
or the shadow of fear,
or the shadow of pain and loneliness,
as we are torn from our family and friends,
and even from the people we long to be.
We ask for the strength
to be aware of and honor our connections one to another,
as well as to the secret parts of ourselves
we fear or hate the most,
so we may discover the peace of green pastures
and the healing of still waters
available to both creator and creation.
Honoring our relationships, we pray.
Amen and blessed be.