

Prayer – It's an Art

Prayer – as unbelievable as it may seem, it's a subject to strike fear into the heart of many ministers. That's because it's both so very personal for people, while also being so very communal in worship. Praying has different meanings and expressions at different times, and is not one thing at all. People feel strongly about prayer, and they feel differently too. So speaking or writing about prayer is dangerous territory. At best, here I can write of my own sense of prayer and praying, not as any definitive explanation, but as one way of describing what is ultimately indescribable.

I'll start off by saying what prayer isn't. It isn't a wish list to God, like a Christmas list to Santa. It's isn't so much about what we want, as it is about trying to conform ourselves and our world to the holy vision for us and for everything. It isn't asking for things to happen and expecting God to make them happen. or asking for things not to happen and expecting God to prevent them. It's not that simple.

Our view of prayer is naturally tied into our view of God. If we conceive of God as a powerful otherworldly figure at some distance from us, waiting to intervene in the world's affairs sometimes, causing things to happen or things to not happen, then our ideas about prayer will match such a notion of God. For me, that's pretty much the God of the wish list. I just wrote about that in an earlier article, "My god May Not Be Your God".

The God I relate to isn't like that, so my notion of prayer isn't like that either. There's a mystery to prayer, that makes even my words here less than complete, less than adequate. Prayer is a way to touch and express the deepest nature of our spirits. If God is found within us at the core of our being, as I believe, then prayer becomes an intimate and personal connection at the deepest level of our createdness and blessedness.

To pray, then, is to enter into a deep conversation with God, the ground and foundation of our being. I'm not saying that we speak words and God speaks words back. But it's a conversation nonetheless. When we open up our souls in real prayer, we open up our capacity to engage the Spirit within us and within all creation, and we ready ourselves to experience that connection in a great many possible ways. That's the Spirit within – God's Spirit – responding.

As these ideas about God and prayer have evolved for me over the years, my approach to prayer has also changed. Now, you typically won't hear me *speak to God* in a prayer. I'll *pray about God*, and even more often I'll *pray about ourselves*. Rather than using words like "Dear God, ...", I'll use words

like “May we ...” or “May the world...” Prayer doesn’t open up God to our desires, but rather opens up our spirits to God’s presence and may even link us to that holy vision for us and all creation, and help us move closer to that vision.

Prayer is like poetry, or music, or art – or love. The engagement we have with any of these is deeper than words. The words are important, but what gets opened up inside is even more important. In fact, words can sometimes get in the way, and are always incomplete expressions of the relatedness we have with such intimate and personal aspects of life.

With all this, what about prayer and praying in a church worship service? Why do we do it? What does it mean?

Prayer in worship is a way to express in community those deep yearnings of our hearts and spirits that we may share in common with others.

Sometimes I’ll choose to have the words to a prayer spoken by everyone together. Joining our voices that way can add weight and power to the ideas those words express, and thereby urge us toward that opening up within. But sometimes that way of praying in church can lead to nothing more than people reading empty words together, with nothing at all happening within themselves. I think there is little worse in a worship service than activity that is empty of meaning and depth.

So other times I’ll choose to speak a prayer alone, to be heard by others. This gets the activity of reading out of the way, and perhaps allows time and space for people to hear their own unuttered prayers in my words, and hold them inside more directly and in a deeper way.

It’s clear from the Gospels that Jesus took prayer seriously. The stories of our faith tell us that prayer has had a place in the human-God relationship for a very long time. That calls us to take prayer seriously too, whether it’s the individual prayers we offer through our daily and ongoing activities, or the prayers we use in our worship services. I take them seriously, and put time and energy and, yes, prayer, into creating the prayers and crafting the words I use and the words we speak together in worship.

May we engage the mystery of the Spirit at work within us, and the mystery of prayer itself, in ways that add meaning and depth to our living.