

“Prayer: A Modest Manual”

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Psalm 130 Matthew 7:7-11

F.U.C.A.

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I am rather resistant to using “how to” books. I have always recoiled from reading the instruction manuals on my car or my appliances, or the directions for assembling an item I have purchased that soon arrives in a cardboard box in its many pieces. Perhaps its just laziness on my part, or it may be a certain deficiency in linear thinking. It isn’t always easy for me to move from the map, the diagram, or the chart-- the “virtual” reality-- to the reality of a thing in itself.

Any visit to a bookstore will confirm that many people **do** like to read them. Handbooks, self-improvement books or “how to” books of various kinds fill the shelves—how to parent a teen-ager, how to raise a puppy, how to identify valuable antiques, etc. We want to know more about what we care about.

Today’s scripture included what we have come to name, “The Lord’s Prayer. It was Jesus’ guide for his disciples on how to pray. It is a poetic piece which succinctly includes all of the important dimensions of prayer: Naming the Holy and offering devotion, petitioning or asking of God, and declaring our awareness and response to our calling.

Today, I would like to make my own attempt at creating a modest manual on prayer. Obviously, prayer is something that we all care about. And yet, I would make a guess, that most of us approach this aspect of our lives with quite a bit of trepidation, with confusion about what it is, how to do it, what to say and how to listen for the voice of God in return. Have any of you ever read a guidebook on prayer? Recently, I picked up a book that I had acquired some years back. I was drawn to its authors, whose other books I had read in my seminary days. It is called *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*. Its authors, Ann and Barry Ulanov, were students of both theology and depth psychology. Barry, was also a longtime jazz critic.

Well, I intended to just take a casual look at the book, but, almost immediately, I became aware of how important what they were saying was to me at this point in my life. The Ulanovs didn't write like they had just come up with some clever ideas, ones which made good sense and would make a readable book, but rather like people who knew with their hearts, who had become aware in their spirits the truth about what they were saying. I guess, in a way, this book is a kind of guidebook on prayer. It begins with the declaration that prayer is "primary speech." I hope after I have introduced you to a few of their perspectives, that this first simple statement will begin to speak to your own experience with prayer—to free you, to challenge you, and to hold out an exhilarating promise for your own spiritual life.

Many of us, especially those who might define ourselves as more progressive, inclusive and pluralistic Christians, approach prayer with some ambivalence. We want to be ethical and faithful beings, live compassionate lives, be good stewards of our resources, and explore the meaning of scripture for our lives and the life of this world in our time and place. But, when it comes to prayer, well, we aren't sure. We have many unanswered questions. What do we have a right to pray for? When is prayer just magical thinking, thinking we should have outgrown by now? Shouldn't we just work to help our neighbor instead of sitting by, "idly", and praying for him? Why should we pray for healing? If this really works, why didn't it work for so many of the most faithful people we know, whose illnesses ended in their deaths? Why should we keep speaking to a being, a force beyond us who doesn't seem to answer us in any kind of language we can understand? Doesn't prayer deserve the beautiful, the holy, words we hear in church? What if I can't find these words in my own vocabulary? If I don't feel that I have grown in my prayer life, even beyond the prayers I spoke as a young child, what is the point of praying? Why does trying to pray make me feel silly, needy, immature and spiritually empty? Good questions, huh? Sounds like the kind of questions we could all pray about.

Prayer brings up a lot of stuff for us. And that is *why* we know it is working. It is exactly how we know that, even in the face of profound doubt and emptiness, we are being

guided to continue to do it, or, in some cases, to start to do it. Prayer *begins* in “confession” and, let’s face it, most of us are “beginner prayers”, even if we have been doing it most of our lives. Confession, in the way I am using it here, is not about how we fall short of who we should be. Confession is a speaking forth about who it is that we are. Confession isn’t beating oneself up before God. Prayer can be referred to as “primary speech”, because it is an internal language filled with the often unspoken images and the deepest values of our lives. These may be good, bad, disturbing, reassuring, despondent, hopeful, egotistical, passionate, regretful, or grateful. Prayer is primary speech because this inner language exists even before we have the words for it. Our words when they come are merely the nets that can be used to gather up these images and values. Sometimes the words come to us and sometimes they don’t, but the primary speech is already there and in its silence, God hears it. In our praying we are like the road workers we frequently see on our morning commutes to work. With our orange vests and our yellow signs, our shovels, picks, drills and concrete, we are working on the road that connects our individual earthly life with the life of the spirit. As we pray we build and repair that road. Prayer forms the infrastructure of our lives. Praying isn’t unrealistic; it is the most *realistic* thing there is. Since prayer is a practice, it must be *practiced* if we are to sense its great value for our lives.

Prayer does not just speak our conscious thoughts. Even desires, fears, and resentments, regrets, and grief, of which we are not consciously aware, come forth in our primary speech of prayer. Prayer is a direct line to our interior life. It can wake us up to what is there. What is there is important to know. If it seems shameful or wicked or hopeless or ugly, that is all right. True, it doesn’t feel all right, but if we deny it or repress it in order to live up to our idea of ourselves as a good person, then we have actually denied ourselves, the self that actually is, and we have shut off access to what we must know about ourselves in order to grow in our life of the spirit. The Ulanovs say it like this. “Not to see what is there, or to turn away from it as an impossible nastiness within ourselves, is to compound a difficult or frightening fantasy with a really destructive fiction, that we are not what we are.”

God came to us in Jesus in the flesh and God continues to come to us, as individuals, in the flesh. The spirit lives in our flesh. This is where we have to begin in prayer. Better said, this is where we are **free** to begin, in honesty, candor, and a willingness to expose our real self both to our self and to the “other” who meets us in prayer. We do not need to worry that our prayers aren’t worthy. If we are to grow in prayer we must trust this primary speech. Do we lead with an expression of our desire? Though this may seem selfish and unworthy of prayer, perhaps there is another way to see it. Consider that all prayer begins in desire, a desire for connection with God, or whatever name we use for God or image we have of God, as personal friend or as disembodied spirit that permeates the universe. Our desire, however petty and blind it may be, opens a door. Desire provides the energy that moves us forward into prayer, so that it can be, first, understood by us and through the *practice* of prayer, refined and transformed into its greater form of being, as desire for a connection to what is greater and more worthy, as desire for truth itself. The late, great Thomas Merton, monk, author, social activist and student of comparative religion once prayed the following prayer about his desire.

My Lord God I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that my *desire* to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

We may feel, as have certain thinkers before us, that because we humans project our own images onto God, (as gift giver, an all loving being, a judge, an indwelling spirit) that we are just making God up, and we should stop with this childish fantasizing about God, grow up, and get on with the business of living this life. Yes, of course our ideas about God grow out of our religious upbringing as well as the images, events, yearnings, desires and disappointments of our lives. We are image-making creatures. God created us this way but God also meets us in this image making with God’s own images. The Ulanovs use Jacob’s dream, from the book of Genesis, in which he sees a ladder reaching

from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it, as a way to picture this ascent of the human spirit and descent of the divine spirit. This is an image of prayer as a path both **to** God and a path **from** God. The images we have of God start our conversation with God, allowing God to refine them and transform them. It is only when we make *idols* out of our images for God, mistaking our images for unquestionable reality that we have shut down the profound prospect for a two-way conversation.

And as to that difficult question which most of us have already asked in prayer, “Is anyone listening? Are there any answers to come in prayer? Consider this. By making us more aware of ourselves, our desires, our needs, our limitations, our love for others and our hopes for them, prayer expands the self and makes the soul more porous. This more permeable self can now receive the light from God that shines into it, allowing new perspective, depth of understanding, creative ideas that suddenly make good sense, an excitement that gives us energy for living, an awareness of time as opening up and shedding its oppressive restriction of our days.

Yes, *Primary Speech* is a good guidebook, offering wonderful promises for a life full of prayer. Our scripture this morning held one of these promises. “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

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