

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield

October 20, 2013

UU Prayer

Rev. Maddie Sifantus

Rev. Maddie revisits the topic of Prayer, by request. Do you pray? If you do, who or what do you pray to? How do you pray? What is prayer for UUs? Is there one answer? (No.)

READING

Max Coots

Until recently, as history goes, almost everyone assume that God, by whatever name and in whatever form, was the omnipotent puppeteer pulling the strings that controlled everything from amoebae to empires, from ants to conquering armies, from the movement of the stars to the state of your digestion.

But, after 50,000 years of such unquestioned divine attention, people began to realize that the earth was not the center of the universe; that stars were not tiny, friendly night lights lovingly hung for us; that space stretched out beyond imagination; that spring and summer came whether or not we praised the sun; that it was microscopic organisms, unaware of our personal piety, that brought disease; and that death came to believer and unbeliever alike here on earth, spinning its tiny orbit around its little star in one corner of one galaxy in a seas of galaxies in space.¹

SERMON UU Prayer

I am not sure if any of you wonder how I decide what I am going to talk about on a Sunday morning, these two Sunday mornings a month I have been with you since January 2009. Or maybe you have never given it a thought—what is she going to talk about this time? Although since my sermon titles and a brief synopsis appear in the *Gleam*, our newsletter that comes out each month, you have some idea...you might think, I don't want to hear her talk about *that!* Or maybe, I wonder what she is going to say. Or, I am going to church anyway and will sit through *whatever* to get to coffee hour!

And when I give those titles and what I *think* the sermon is going to be about some weeks or months before I actually write the service, who knows which direction it is going to go. Some of my colleagues refuse to give their congregations titles or themes ahead of time, so that they can be “in the moment” with what is in the news, what they might be reading or what is going on in the congregation. I can relate to that, but I also know that makes it difficult for the folks planning music to know what themes they may need to coordinate with or how what is going on upstairs might relate to what is going on downstairs—although probably today it doesn't have much relation, since our children are

¹ Rzepka, Jane (2012). *From Ziplines to Hosaphones*. Skinner House , 27-28.

learning the Bible story of Sodom and Gomorrah. But perhaps the people of those ancient cities did pray as they were going down into the darkness. The fact is that sometimes, whether you publish titles or not, you have to shift gears as we did last April when the Marathon Bombings took over our psyches, and it just wasn't the time to talk about Earth Day and recycling. It was time to sit together in our confusion and our sadness. Yes, it was time to pray, in our own ways.

In my case, how I plan is a mixture of any number of things. First and foremost, I listen to you. What are you thinking about or wondering about? What is keeping you up at night? What might we need to think about as we discover our vision and mission as a liberal UU congregation here in Wakefield, Massachusetts? Of course, all of you have a chance once a year to buy a sermon theme at the auction, which as you have heard is coming up on November 9th, something I have offered each year since I have been here. I also offer lunch or dinner with me at Zuzu's or Sabatino's—I pay!—when we enjoy each other's company and the food of our neighboring restaurants.

It was at one of those meals over this past summer that Sheila Moran asked me if I might revisit a theme of last year, thinking about how—or whether—UUs pray. You may remember that last February 24, I did a sermon based on author and Memoirist Annie Lamotte's most recent book at that time (she has another one coming out soon, *Stiches*), *Help! Thanks! Wow!* This was her book about prayer. I read then her words from that book, in a section named *Prayer 101*:

You may in fact be wondering what I even mean when I use the word “prayer.” It's certainly not what the TV Christians mean. It's not for display purposes, like plastic sushi or neon. Prayer is private, even when we pray with others. *It is communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding.* Let's say it is communication from one's heart to God. Of if that is too triggering or ludicrous a concept for you, to the Good, the force that is beyond our comprehension but that in our pain or supplication or relief we don't need to define or have proof of or any established contact with. Let's say it is what the Greeks called the Really Real, or what lies within us, beyond the scrim of our values, positions, convictions, and wounds. Or let's say it is a cry from deep within to Life or Love, with capital L's.

Annie Lamott is not a UU, but she is definitely UU friendly. In fact, she is coming back to First Parish in Bedford for a second time on Thursday, November 7th to talk about her new book as a fundraising event. Last time it was a sell-out event so UUs like to hear what she has to say and so do I. But Sheila wanted to hear more about prayer and UUs. So I asked myself (and you): *Do you pray? If*

you do, who or what do you pray to? How do you pray? What is prayer for UUs? Is there one answer? (No.)

Last February I talked some about my friend and colleague Jane Rzepka's thoughts about prayer. Jane is a strong mid-western humanist and doesn't consider the word "prayer" to be in her religious repertoire, even though she is willing to consider it. She posits that UUs have two strategies to deal with the whole concept of prayer. The first group uses the word "prayer" as an expression of their personal, spiritual life. This group uses prayer to mean a whole bunch of things, from meditating on the changing colors as we drive around this week, to the amazing full moon we experienced Friday night, to some of us singing *Dona Nobis Pacem*—give us peace—at the end of Rise Up Singing as we do each month, to the feeling of walking in solitude in the woods and the being in community, singing and saying words, as we are this morning. As Jane says, for this group "to pray they look deep inside, they talk to a friend, they walk, they drive, they sing, they blog, they meditate or contemplate, they prune the trees, they touch their toes, they sit together in church."²

Jane's second group of UUs this broadening of the meaning of the word prayer makes no sense at all. They don't pray and they don't use the word (and some of them don't want anyone else to use the word either). Instead, as Jane sees it, "they strive to feel awake to life, embrace the grandeur of living on this planet, explore those aspects of life that ground them, connect to people and places and the cosmos in general, contribute to the healthy future of neighbors the world over, note beauty in a variety of forms, and value the trajectory toward health and well-being. That kind of thing. They don't pray."³

UU religious educator Dan Harper says, "I don't pray. As a UU child, I learned how to pray. But when I got old enough to take charge of my own spiritual life, I gradually stopped. Every once in a while I try prayer again, just to be sure. The last time was a couple of years ago. My mother spent a long, frightening month in the hospital, so I tried praying once again but it didn't help. I have found my spiritual disciplines—walks in nature, deep conversations, reading ancient and modern scripture, love—or they have found me. Prayer doesn't happen to be one of them."⁴

Probably all of you are in one or another of Jane's two groups, or fall somewhere in between. Or perhaps praying is something you grew up with and gave up on. Or perhaps you try it once in a while, just in case it might work, like Dan Harper. But I love Lamott's definition of prayer, "It is communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding." Whether you are communicating

² Ibid., 29.

³ Ibid., 30.

⁴ Bowers, Catherine, ed. *UU Views of Prayer*.

with God, the Spirit of Life, that which is ultimate and beyond our understanding or just that inmost part of ourselves that we are often not much in touch with, it seems important to me to spend some time finding that inmost place, being mindful of what “is” in our lives, our place in it all and our relation to the passage of time. It is a longing from the heart, a thankfulness for what we have been given, and at times a cry from the soul, from the depths. You can call it Prayer, or not, it seems to me.

UU minister Roger Cowan writes: “In a desperate moment, I cried out for help and I was answered. Some years later, I am still a humanist—I believe that religion is about this world, about bringing justice and mercy and the power of love into life here and now. Yet I am a humanist who prays, who begins each morning with devotional readings and a time of silence and prayer. Why do I do this?

I need a quiet time

I need to express my gratitude.

I need humility.

I pray because—alone—I am not enough and
also I am too much...

When I pray, I acknowledge that God is not me.⁵

Author Richard J. Foster reflects in his slim volume *Prayers From the Heart* that his “whole life...has been an experiment in how to be a portable sanctuary—learning to practice the presence of God in the midst of the stresses and strains of contemporary life.”⁶ I love that—being a portable sanctuary. That we might walk through life and our world bringing our sanctuary with us—our sense of connection with others and with the ultimate—what some have called intimacy and ultimacy. We could just carry it on our back like a turtle’s shell, with our head peaking out from time to time, making our slow plod through our days. We can make up prayers as we go. Or we can use the prayers we have learned of old. Some day I would like to do a sermon on Jesus’ prayer that he taught his Disciples when they asked him how to pray—what we call the “Our Father” or The Lord’s Prayer. I wonder what that would look like outside on our sign for all walking by, including those who thought when they saw *UU Prayer* out there this week that that Spirit of Life stuff just doesn’t cut it.

As you may have gathered, there *is* no right answer—no one answer—to how UUs pray (or don’t pray, as the case may be). Only you can answer whether and how you pray. That is the beauty of being a UU. Furthermore, the exercise of writing about UU Prayer reminds me of when many years ago when I started a

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Foster, Richard J. (1994). *Prayers From the Heart*. Harper Collins, xi.

meditation group at First Parish in Wayland, we got more people attending when we were talking *about* meditation than when we were actually *practicing* meditation. UUs do love to talk and listen to lectures. But sometimes we just have to experience things. So I thought I'd end this morning with several familiar prayers, ending with us singing probably the most familiar UU prayer these days, Carolyn McDade's Spirit of Life (123). Just let the words wash over you; don't try to dissect them and worry about the "G" word. Just see how they make you feel—if they get at that inner sanctuary you carry with you. Let the words ring into the short silences between. And on my signal Alla will play an introduction and you will remain seated and sing Hymn #123, Spirit of Life.

Two prayers by Michael Leunig:

Love is born
With a dark and troubled face
When hope is dead
And in the most unlikely place
Love is born. Love is always born.⁷

We give thanks for our friends.

Our dear friends.
We anger each other.
We fail each other.
We share this sad earth, this tender life,
 This precious time.
Such richness. Such wildness.
Together we are blown about.
Together we are dragged along. All this delight.
All this suffering.
All this forgiving life.
We hold it together. Amen.⁸

Hear this ancient thirteenth century prayer by Richard of Chichester who some of you might recognize as they were used for the song in the Broadway musical *Godspell*:

O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
May we know Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
And follow Thee more nearly,

⁷ Leunig, Michael (1991). *The Prayer Tree*.

⁸ Ibid.

Day by day.⁹
Spirit of Life
Come unto me
Sing in my heart
All the stirrings of compassion
Blow in the wind
Rise in the sea
Move in the hand
Giving life the shape of justice
Roots hold me close
Wings set me free
Spirit of life
Come to me
Come to me

May it be so. Amen

⁹ Foster, 46.