

**I Don't Know Exactly What a Prayer Is**  
**Rev. Tony Lorenzen**  
**Pathways Church**  
**Sunday, August 8, 2010**

I used to sit on a wooden meditation bench, a bench Tina's grandfather made for me, just for the purpose, custom made so that my feet were flat on the floor, my knees at a right angle, my back straight. I still have this bench. I was serious about this praying thing. I used to sit on this bench and pray what Catholics call the Holy Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours – The book of Psalms divided up so that you pray them all, a few at time, at different hours of the day, every day, over the course of the year. The daily office is long. The entire thing can fill three or four, thick volumes. The hours, or the times of prayer are:

- [Matins](#) (during the night), sometimes referred to as [Vigils](#) or [Nocturns](#),
- [Lauds](#) or Dawn Prayer (at Dawn)
- [Prime](#) or Morning Prayer (First Hour = 6 a.m.)
- [Terce](#) or Mid-Morning Prayer (Third Hour = 9 a.m.)
- [Sext](#) or Noon Prayer (Sixth Hour = 12 noon)
- [None](#) or Afternoon Prayer (Ninth Hour = 3 p.m.)
- [Vespers](#) or Evening Prayer ("at the lighting of the lamps")

- [Compline](#) or *Night Prayer (before retiring)*

I never even attempted to keep the entire Divine Office. What I did was get a copy of the Roman Breviary, in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, it's called the horologian or Book of Hours. I tried for about five years, the three years I was at Harvard Divinity School and about two years afterward, with intermittent success, to pray Morning prayer, Mid-day or mid-afternoon prayer, and Vespers or Compline. By the time I stopped, it was morning prayer and Vespers and then Morning Prayer Or Vespers.

When I began, I used the actual Roman Breviary, with language like this:

O God, come to my aid.

*O Lord, make haste to help me.*

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,  
world without end.

Amen. Alleluia.

O sing unto the Lord † a new song; \* sing unto the Lord, all the whole earth.

Sing unto the Lord, and bless his Name; \* be telling of his salvation from day to day.

Declare his glory among the heathen, \* and his wonders among all peoples.

For the Lord is great, and exceeding worthy to be praised; \* he is to be feared above all gods.

For all the gods of the heathen, they are but devils; \* but it is the Lord that made the heavens.

Then, seeing as I was at Harvard Divinity School, I got varied and more progressive translations. Such as this:

*Glory to you source of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit*

*My soul proclaims your greatness, O my God and my spirit rejoiced in you, my savior.*

*For your regard has blessed my, poor and a serving woman.*

I Don't Know Exactly What a Prayer Is

*You have put down the mighty from their seat and have lifted up the powerless.*

*You have filled the hungry with good things, and have sent the rich away empty.*

*You remembering your mercy and have helped your people Israel  
As you promised Abraham and Sarah and their children forever...*

Remember, I was still Catholic at the time. And then I worked at a Catholic high school and tried to get, what was I thinking into the psalms with *Prayers Before an Awesome God – the Psalms for Teenagers* with translations like this:

*They want us to believe that there is no God,  
That you are a figment of our imagination  
And that if you do exist, you really don't care.*

That's the rub, isn't it? Dealing with the concept, the idea, the reality, the task of prayer means dealing with the concept and the reality and person or being of God, doesn't it? Or does it?

When Unitarian Universalists hear the word "prayer" it seems to me, you get one of two reactions. You either get a group of people lining up, saying, "finally, there's really a church in this church." OR you get an exasperated bunch of sighs, "not again, I thought I was getting away from that stuff in this church."

I think the Unitarian Universalists who want to get away from prayer, by and large, have a fundamentalist understanding of prayer. The prayer we tend to want nothing to do with is something called petitionary prayer. This is the prayer of asking for something from an omnipotent deity, usually a deity portrayed as an elderly white male with a long white beard sitting on a cloud, holding a staff and controlling the universe like a gamer controls a player and everything else in a video game they are playing. I'm going to guess that a lot of you had this image of

God while Margaret was inquiring and petitioning during our little drama this morning.

I want you to notice a couple of things about God especially as related to prayer. Things we can learn with the help of Margaret, Judy Blume and Clara. Did you see any elderly, white male with a long beard? Did you see the controls to the universe? Notice how Margaret kept her inquiry open. *Are you there, God? I'll look for you.* Notice that she wished she had guidance, not that there's anything wrong with any religion or one is better than another, but that even she realizes that at twelve years old, relating to the divine nature of the universe needs guidance. It needs language and practices to help it along. She has been left wandering around in the woods all by herself, with her parents right there all the time. Thank you God, for Unitarian Universalism, where Jewish and Christian, and Buddhist and Muslim, and even Atheist and Agnostic ways of relating to the divine mystery are part of this path, part of the way we negotiate

our way through the world. If only Margaret's parents knew there were plenty of UU churches in New Jersey in the 1970s!

Prayer is not just asking God for things, that's petitionary prayer. When we join in on the asking, that's called intercessory prayer. When we ask to be forgiven, that's penitentiary prayer – sounds like going to jail, doesn't it? A lot of people who find Unitarian Universalist churches come from religious pasts where they were tired of being told what sinners they are, so this type of prayer really gets left behind. Two other types of prayer – praise and thanksgiving – really get overlooked. They are either brushed aside as empty platitudes coming from people caught up in a “praise Jesus, praise him mentality” or lost in our rush of daily life when it is so easy to focus on what has gone wrong and the cliché of counting our blessings seems trite in the daily grind. But the only prayer you really need, if you only have just one prayer, is “thank you.”

I just stopped praying the liturgy of the hours. It just wasn't working for me, as things just don't tend to work for you – well,

you know how it is, right? For a long time, and this really bothered me because, well I had Master of Divinity Degree from HARVARD, I was a religious professional, I didn't feel like I knew what praying was. Was I doing it right? Where was God? I never got answers? Geez, I couldn't relate to all these supposed spiritual giants like St. Augustine and St. Ignatius of Loyola and Hildegard of Bingen and what was it I wasn't getting? I liked going for a walk at Rockwell Pond and reading poems and I understood characters in books written for preteen girls who asked if God was there. What was wrong with me? Where was my burning bush, God damn it!

But I learned a lot from the time with those psalms, though. I know my psalms. I know some other things, too. I really like praying the psalms now, and I do too. I really like morning prayer and can't start my day right without it, but now it consists of sitting in silence and just listening to God instead of talking because you have to listen, too. I also love Mid-Day and Mid-Afternoon prayer, but love walking it, now, usually in the woods or on a trail and it's

so much better with trees and water and it there can be ocean, even better. And vespers, vespers might just be my favorite. I love that vespers is the lighting of the lamps - what a great name! I hope that some of you will join me this year, hear at Pathways every Wednesday night at 6 p.m. for Vespers. We will light candles, share a brief reading on the monthly theme and share joys and concerns.

What I didn't know when I used to pray to the liturgy of the hours was that I wasn't praying. I was too worried about whether or not I was praying. Now, I am attentive to what God has put in my life, what did I miss, what did I see and hear, taste, touch and smell, and what will I notice if I stop and reflect? I used to worry about who or what God is, not anymore. For me, God just is, the sacred divine IS. You don't have to agree with me about it and I don't argue about it. I'm not twelve anymore and I don't worry whether or not God is there, even when God seems very absent because I've been through enough where God has been there on

the other side of horrible. God is like hope, not a way out, but a way through.

I've learned that praying takes as many words, shapes and forms as God does. Maybe you recognize some of them? Maybe you do some of them and never thought of them as prayer.

- Meditation
- Sacred Reading
- Journaling
- Retreats
- Fasting
- Tithing
- Walking
- Yoga
- Painting
- Drawing
- Playing Music
- Listening to Music
- Cooking

- Gardening
- Vegetarianism, Ethical Eating
- Martial Arts
- Quilting
- Recycling
- Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression
- Parenting

Just about anything done in a sacred manner, with repetition, depth, and intentionality can be a prayer. Just going out and walking the dog isn't automatically praying, per se. There's a bit more involved. Do you do walk you're dog daily? Is there a depth of relationship between you and your dog and the scared or do you just fit the walk in, rushing to get it done between work and dinner letting your mind churn over the next seven items on your to-do list and answering emails on the Crackberry.

If you are not a pray-er, I encourage you give it another shot. My colleague Erik Walker Wikstrom quotes Episcopal priest and author Martin Bell in his book *Simply Pray* “You cannot engage the sacred and then commit; commitment is the one and only way of engaging the sacred.”

Wikstrom adds, “You can't find out what 'wet' feels like unless you get into the water. There's simply no way to talk about it. There's no explaining it. There's no way to talk about it. There's no understanding it even. There's just getting wet.”

As you know, A bunch of us just got back from SWUUSI – the Southwest UU Summer Institute. What it is, is family church camp for Unitarian Universalists. The theme this year was Swimming in the deep end and it was a good old fashioned tent meeting revival more than anything. We spend a week putting the church back in this church. It was okay to use religious language, to sing, to pray. And sing and pray we did. There's only one thing that's going to grow

Unitarian Universalism, my colleague Rev. Aaron White said, preaching a radical transforming encounter with the power of love and justice I call that God, you call it what you want.

Arguing about God is so, so, 20<sup>th</sup> century. You got to go out into the world and get your hands dirty and be open to having your life transformed and I thought, hey that's what we do here at Pathways. Isn't that what we mean when we say we're a spiritual community that changes lives? The only way we do that is dive in to the deep end, not be afraid to go into the depths.

That's what I found out all those years ago when I prayed the Daily Office. I didn't know what a prayer was and I didn't know how to swim, but I was getting wet. I was in the water. I dove right into the deep end. God isn't an old white man with a long beard who lives on a cloud and controls the universe who gives you some things and denies you others. That's not how it works and that's not why I pray. It's lot more complicated than that, but it's only something I can

share with you if you're willing to get in the water, or walk your dog, or sit quietly, or eat only vegetables, or knit, or journal or paint, or do yoga regularly, with repetition and attention to the divine.

I've come a long way from struggling with the Daily Office, to not knowing exactly what a prayer is, to walking in the woods and sitting still and even using the Psalms again because I learned – how did I miss it in Divinity School – that the people who wrote the Psalms were crying out from the depths and mountaintops of the human condition to the core of the universe. They poured out their heart in thanksgiving, they wrung their hands in unspeakable grief and agony, they fumbled for words in shock and confusion, they wondered if anyone and anything was out there or in here, just like Margaret. The writers of the psalms admitted their fears and doubt and arrogantly stated their certainties. They were just like us. Here's some of Psalm 63 in a translation by Nan. C. Merrill from her book *Psalms for Praying*:

*O, Love, You are my Beloved, and I long for You, my soul thirsts for You; All that is within me thirsts, as in a dry and barren land with no water.*

*So I have called out to you in my heart,*

*Seeing your power and glory*

*Because your wondrous love is life in me*

*My lips will praise you and I would radiate your*

*Love as long as I live, becoming a blessing to others*

*In gratitude to you.*

I may not know exactly what a prayer is, but I've got a better idea now. I hope you do, too.