

**July 26, 2020**

**What is Prayer? Based on selected readings from Luke's Gospel**  
**Opening Prayer:**

"I am a failure at prayer. When people ask me about my prayer life, I feel like a bulimic must feel when people ask about her favourite dish. My mind starts scrambling for ways to hide my problem. I start talking about other things I do that I hope will make me sound like a godly person. I try to say admiring things about prayer so there can be no doubt about how important I think it is. I ask the other person to tell me about her prayer life, hoping she will not notice that I have changed the subject."

"I would rather show someone my checkbook stubs than talk about my prayer life. I would rather confess that I am a rotten godmother, that I struggle with my weight, that I fear I am overly fond of Bombay Sapphire gin martinis than confess that I am a prayer-weakling. To say I love God but I do not pray much is like saying I love life, but I do not breath much."

"The only way I have found to survive my shame is to come at the problem from both sides, exploring two distinct possibilities: 1) that prayer is more than my idea of prayer and 2) that some of what I actually do in my life may constitute genuine prayer."<sup>1</sup>

Those sentiments are from Barbara Brown Taylor, a renowned Episcopal priest, professor, author and theologian in her book *An Alter In the World*. Barbara is one of the United States' best-known preachers<sup>2</sup> and one of my favourite theologians to read. She was in fact one of those individuals that were instrumental in my transformation from spiritual seeker to ministry student.

I remember as I entered the Diaconal Ministry training program my searching for who and what God was for me. I figured I was required to conform to some specific standard. And when it came to prayer, I was even more uncertain. How was I supposed to pray? What words were acceptable? How could they be genuine? What pastoral words was I supposed to give to others that would be meaningful and of comfort? Was there going to be some kind of exam on how I lead prayer and some test on the nature and extent of my personal prayer life?

I confess that I didn't really have a devoted, consistent prayer practice prior to my training, and I am so glad I wasn't asked the question, "so I can tell us about your prayer life." I would have to reply, "well I don't really have one." So, I totally get what Barbara Brown Taylor says she

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Alter In The World*, HarperOne, 2010, p. 176

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara\\_Brown\\_Taylor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Brown_Taylor)

would rather talk about something else than confess what she calls prayer failure.

Does any of this resonate with you? Might you want to avoid the subject of prayer altogether? Do you pray? Do you think there are right and wrong ways to pray? Do you think it is an important practice? Is it helpful? Is it useful? Do you have to acquire special training or experience to pray? Have you even ever thought much about it? My hope for today and over the next week or two is to give us some opportunity to open ourselves to questions about prayer and do some wondering.

My Readers Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary and Miriam Webster's definitions of prayer are pretty close to the same, "an address, such as a petition to God; an earnest request or wish; something one does in a religious service, spiritual communion with God, an awareness of God's presence." With the exception of the last two, "a spiritual communion with God and an awareness of God's presence," I think the definitions are far too limiting.

Some of you will remember our book review of "Grounded," by Diana Butler Bass. Diana speaks about finding and experiencing God In many different ways. She says, "many millions of contemporary people experience God as far more personal and accessible than ever before."<sup>3</sup> She goes on to describe how God is in the very soil we walk on; water God's very lifeblood<sup>4</sup> and the sky; the breath of God, humanity's womb.<sup>5</sup>

So it would seem to me that every opportunity we take to commune with what is around us we can be prayer. I expect a lot of you don't think of prayer that way.

I received a gift of some new potatoes yesterday grown locally from a member of our congregation. I wonder if they thought that when they were planting, weeding and harvesting those potatoes, there was prayer going on.

And I saw a picture recently of one of you playing with a grandchild on a sandy beach looking for small crawlers and other surprises. That was a prayerful time for everyone involved. I heard that some of you have been out on the lake, taking in the summer sun and heat. I guarantee you had some prayerful time.

My daughter in Princeton just erected a new play set for our 4-year-old granddaughter Athena. Athena ran like the wind to it in anticipation of

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<sup>3</sup> Grounded, p.9

<sup>4</sup> p. 70

<sup>5</sup> p. 109

her first slide. Glee on her face and joy in her mother's, communion with God, being in the presence of the Holy, being in prayer.

Of course, prayer is not always a time of great joy. Holding a child's hand through the tears of a first dental visit offering the reassurance only a parent can do is prayer. It is a connection to what is Holy Love. So is holding the hand of someone in palliative care, whether or not you offer some spoken words of comfort or just sit together in silence. Prayer can be the phone call you give, and the message received on the other end. We know how good a genuine hug feels, its a prayerful act that communicates joy, friendship, welcome, or "its going to be OK." That's why we are missing hugs so much during this pandemic!

Jesus often retreated to a place of solitude to pray. Perhaps he was asking God for guidance and reassurance. Perhaps he was celebrating his ministry giving thanks for the gifts others were receiving, like the healing of the heart, or the uplifting of the spirit. Perhaps he experienced encouragement through meditation that Kin-dom change might be coming. Perhaps he expressed doubt, wondering if he was making a difference. Perhaps he took time out to look upon what God had created, the Earth Below and the Sky above and closed his eyes thinking it was all so magical and amazing. This was all prayer.

I expect Jesus was in prayer when he walked and spoke to simple fishermen or sat at a table for a meal. I expect he was prayerful when he looked out on the 5,000 and wondered by what miracle they could all be fed. I expect he was in prayer beside the small quite stream in solitude or together with children on his knee.

I expect Jesus was comforted through prayer. I expect he found new strength and new energy. I expect he felt at times like the child holding its mother's hand on the first trip to the dentist. When he prayed to God during his journey to the cross, I expect he felt like someone you know when you visited them before their final journey.

Prayer is anything that connects us to the Holy, anytime we experience God's presence, anything we do when we embrace the incredible gift of creation. Prayer is walking gently with someone you love or listening intently to someone who is in a fearful, dark, or desperate place. Prayer connects us to Holy Love.

Barbara Brown Taylor thought she was a failure at prayer, and I wondered that too. Of course, prayer is not a contest, but I am thankful now that I reflect on my prayer life, I know that I am immersed in prayer every day and I am so thankful for that gift. What about you?

Thanks for listening this morning. Amen

