

## Reflection for August 2, 2020

**References: Psalm 61:1-4, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 and Romans 8:26-27**

Prayer:

“Prayer is the activity that enables each of us to be givers to and receivers from one another of the deepest meaning of life – a meaning I call God.”<sup>1</sup>

That is a profound quote. It is from John Shelby Spong, in his book, *A New Christianity For a New World*. It is actually not that new being published in 2002. In this publication, Spong, a retired Episcopal Bishop, discusses prayer in some detail. He speaks about his early prayer life and how that has changed over the years. In his early ministry he, like many, shared prayers “to God” who was perceived as an entity separate from us. God was a supernatural being who could grant our petitions. Over the years that became less and less meaningful to him. Spong says that he got the impression “that many believers thought of prayers as adult letters to Santa Claus.”<sup>2</sup>

I had to laugh at that comment, but at the same time it reminded me that prayer, like a lot of things about “religion” is often sadly misunderstood. It is unfortunate really that so many in the secular society still think we pray because we expect God to intervene on our behalf and make something happen. And of course, fundamentalists would try to convince us that this is exactly the case.

I remember years ago a family member was prayed over in a church service. Her partner was gravely ill. She was told she would find him sitting up in hospital when she next visited. Unfortunately, that didn’t happen. The church leadership said she hadn’t prayed hard enough! I remembered being incredibly angry at that manipulation. What kind of God would do that? And I have heard stories during my volunteer time in hospital chaplaincy work that some feel they or their loved ones might not be accepted into what they call “heaven” because of their lack of

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<sup>1</sup> Spong, p. 196

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 190

commitment, their lack of belief. Presumably, if they had practiced meaningful prayer things would be different.

I am sure many of you have heard stories recently of Pastors praying fervently to God for the strength to cast out the Covid Virus in their congregations. They say things like, “we have prayed to God that he will keep us safe and we know that the virus will not come in here.” I’m not sure what happens if someone contracts the disease, perhaps they would be criticized for not believing in the prayer’s power and potential. There is always some scapegoat it seems if those kinds of prayers are not answered.

Many of the Psalms are prayers or petitions. Today’s excerpt from Psalm 61 is no exception. The Psalm is a prayer that speaks about God’s grace and comfort. “Hear my cry, listen to my prayer, let me abide in your tent forever taking refuge under your wings.

God is not seen here as some controller or giver of special privilege. God is seen as respite, protection, reassurance, guidance, solace. The Psalmist is not asking for a “to do” but for a “to be.”

In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians we heard an excerpt from today, what does he mean “pray without ceasing?” Is he asking the early Christians to seek out an interventionist God, a deity who would somehow change the world? That seems not the case.

Paul is continuing with his vision of the community themselves being the change agents. Pray without ceasing means continue to be engaged in promoting what Jesus called the new Kingdom. Pray, stay motivated, don’t be discouraged, be enmeshed in Christ’s journey. Pray that the journey you are on will gather momentum and that more will become enlightened. There is nothing in Paul’s letter that says, ask God to do something for you. The opposite is the case, pray, connect with the Holy, with others in the community, and in unity gain strength for the commitment to spread the good news.

Richard Rohr, Franciscan Monk, and author suggests prayer is something that happens to us, rather than something we specifically do. He suggests that through prayer you are being led, being guided, being

loved, being used, being prayed through.”<sup>3</sup> Prayer is about motivating us, changing us and encouraging us in our journey when we might doubt, as much as it is about comforting and assuring us that we are not alone in times of despair or grief.

“For we do not know how to pray as we ought,” says Paul in his letter to the fledging church in Rome. Contextually, don’t pray for yourself, pray for your church community, pray for Jesus, pray for peace, justice, and harmony. Let the spirit flow through you and your actions and your prayers for change may be realized. And remember that this is God in action through you and your meditations, your prayers.

Last Sunday I reflected on times when we are in prayer when we don’t necessarily think we might be. Times like gardening, sitting quietly by the water’s edge in contemplation, sitting with an individual who is in crisis or volunteering for the Food Bank or Hospice. Those are all times of prayer. They are personal contemplative times that connect us individually with the beauty of creation. They offer us a time to be centered and remember what is important despite all of our distractions. And they are times others are prayerfully comforted by our presence.

When we pray intentionally for or with someone else, it offers opportunity for peace, calm, reassurance and hope. But your prayers don’t resonate through you alone, they transform life as the Holy Presence flows through you and into others. In a personal plea, the “ask” is not that God would resolve your sadness, concern, or doubt. The ask is to be bathed in Holy Love. In that place we somehow understand that there is opportunity for our burden to be lifted and a place where we can find assurance.

Times of prayer are also the times when we are intentional in sharing our hopes and dreams for a new creation, a new kin-dom. When we offer prayers of gratitude, prayers holding up hope for the fallen, prayers looking for an opportunity for reconciliation or a peaceful end to conflict, God has an opportunity to work through our collective. As Paul hoped the words “pray without ceasing” in the early church would spark societal change, the same can be said for our community prayers. We hope when they are voiced and heard, the light of change will find the dark place.

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<sup>3</sup> Rohr, p. 102

Spong says prayer for him is living. "God is in you," he says, "reconciling, healing, restoring, making whole. Prayer is thus the conscious recognition of that reality."

For me this says, we are in prayer when we do anything that connects us to the Holy. It is quiet contemplation when we seek to be reminded that the spirit love connects all things in this vast universe. That spirit can birth miracles. It has resurrection potential. The Holy can also provide the gift of hope and affirmation and we can be reassured by its presence.

Prayer is an incredible thing.

Thank you for your prayers tirelessly given for this community and for one another: for health and healing, for hope and comfort, for strength and security, and for the gifts of love that you freely share.

And thank you for being a part of this worship time, which has also been a time of prayer.

Amen