

## Let Us Pray

How old were you the first time you prayed?

Can you remember what prayer it was you prayed?

For some of us, we recited the Lord's Prayer every day before school. Some of us went to parochial schools where prayer was a part of the daily curriculum.

I went to a secular school for my elementary and secondary education. Every morning we would recite the Lord's Prayer and then sing O Canada. The problem with that kind of prayer is that it's not learned, it's memorised. There is no teaching, only rote recall.

It wasn't until many years later that I began to understand what prayer was about. My love affair with prayer began in a time of great sorrow. My Nana died when I was six and less than a year later my Uncle Ernie died. Nana was my Mam's Mam and Uncle Ernie her brother. Naturally, my Mam was gutted, especially after her Mam died.

I remember one night lying in my bed, unable to sleep. I closed my eyes and said "Dear God" – and for several minutes said nothing and held my heart open for whatever it was that needed to be said. I was too young to understand petitions and thanksgivings. That prayer had no words spoken aloud, and yet was perfect.

Jesus teaches us about prayer. He tells us in Matthew's Gospel "whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6.7, NRSV)

In other words, don't stand shouting on the street corner as you pray. While we most often pray with other people, prayer is also a solo event, done in private with only God as your witness. The words do not matter so much as your intention. It has been my experience that the most profound prayers are those which contain no words.

When my Dad was undergoing surgery for an abdominal aortic aneurysm and we were unsure if he would survive the surgery, I paced in the waiting room for what felt like days. His surgeon came to see me and told me he had done all he could, and if I was a person who prayed, now would be the time.

I learned later, that his surgeon was Muslim and would pray before and after each surgery. I was so touched that my dad's surgeon was also a faithful man of God.

Growing up we did not pray as a family. I would suspect it was felt that prayer was for the Church. The Canadian government removed prayer from public schools in September 1988. I very often hear the utterance "Oh thank God" when someone receives news that a person has survived an accident, or surgery, or has been located after going missing. But did they pray?

For some, prayer is a kind of contract with God. I can sound like this –

So God, if I pray to you and tell you how fabulous you are, will you help me find a better parking space or give me the winning lottery numbers?

OR – So God, if you spare my child from this disease I promise to go to Church more often and stop using your name in anger.

OR – So God, I know you only hear from me when I want something, but, well, can I have this favour i.e. a job promotion or win that radio contest?

We can laugh at those examples, yet for many people, that is how prayer is seen – as a contractual obligation.

There are all kinds of scholarly and theological definitions about prayer, yet for me, prayer is entering into and maintaining a relationship with the divine. I would pray at funerals and weddings; at baptisms and bar mitzvahs. I would always follow the leader, as it were because I didn't believe I knew how to or even had the right to pray alone. I was wrong.

After the surgeon's suggestion to pray, I found the hospital chapel and did just that. "Dear God", I began, hands clasped together, knelt on the floor, "please save my Dad. Uh, thanks." Oh, and Amen."

Every day when I got to the hospital I would go first to the Chapel and pray. Each time it was a reiteration of that first awkward prayer. And then I began to remember my manners and began with thank you. "Dear God", I began, "thank you for Dr. Awl and for all the medical team who has cared so well for my Dad. Please keep him alive because I think he still has work to do, and he still has more to teach me. Amen."

Did you know that adherent Muslims pray five times a day? At dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening.

Did you know that adherent Jews pray three times a day? Morning, afternoon and evening.

Did you know that adherent Christians pray seven times a day? From the time of the early Church, the practice of seven fixed prayer times have been taught; in Apostolic Tradition, Hippolytus instructed Christians to pray seven times a day "on rising, at the lighting of the evening lamp, at bedtime, at midnight" and "the third, sixth and ninth hours of the day, being hours associated with Christ's Passion. In many monastic houses, the friars or nuns continue to pray seven times a day?

For myself, I endeavour to pray three times a day. Upon awakening, at midday and again before sleep. From time to time I do follow a breviary, which is a collection of prayers for specific times of the day during different seasons of the year such as Advent, Lent, Spring, Summer, etc.

I pray much more often when I travel, especially if I'm flying. I pray before and after meals, sometimes aloud, often silently. In many monastic houses you pray before a meal to give thanks for the ones who prepare and serve it and you pray again after the meal for those who made the meal possible i.e. farmers, ranchers, etc.

Prayer can be corporate and it can be intensely private. And while Jesus gives us helpful tips and tricks for prayer, such as washing ones face and closing the door, there is not only one way to pray.

Bookstore shelves are filled with books of prayer from around the world, or different ways in which to pray. You can pray while walking, often a labyrinth.

You can pray while moving, you can pray while remaining completely still. There was a time when the only way to pray "properly" was to kneel in absolute silence.

Back in the days of the early Church, the faithful would gather during Lenten Worship for forty days on their knees. And during the fifty days of Easter they would stand. I couldn't even imagine. My body hurts thinking about maintaining those postures.

Prayer is not a form of spell-casting or witchcraft.

Nor is it magic.

Nor is it intended to take the place of medical treatment.

For believers, prayer can be a powerful force of intention and love to God and for others.

For atheists, prayer is not done, but they can offer intentions.

For some the word prayer sounds awkward, but they will offer good thoughts or good vibes.

In all honesty, they are the same thing. How they are delivered is different, yet at closer examination, they are all about intentions. Thinking loving thoughts of someone, or sending positive energy to someone can be as powerful as holding someone in prayer.

For my friend Vivian who is an atheist, she will, on occasion, ask me to pray for a member of her family. When she learned my Mam had been ill, she promised me she would offer intentions for her.

Remember, language is important.

I would never tell an atheist that I would pray for them. That would be hurtful. If an atheist tells me they are offering intentions I am honoured because they think highly enough of me or my situation, to know I am in need of help and cannot do it alone. They are offering to lift me up in thought. And that is an incredibly loving gift.

So, whether you are a person who prays, or offers loving thoughts, or sends intentions, know this. Regardless of what you call it, it can be very powerful.

I do not believe that prayer is more powerful than good feelings or thoughts.

I don't believe that intentions are less powerful than prayer. The most important part of all that is not the words that are said, but the emotion and intention behind it.

It is not enough to say "I'm holding you in prayer" or "I'm thinking of you". What is important is to actually DO those things. To take time, however brief and surrender yourself to those intentions. For believers, those intentions, or thoughts or prayers are to the divine. We are offering to be a conduit of good and of change.

If we were to rewrite or reframe the Lord's prayer into today's language it may sound something like this...

Dear God,

wherever it is you are, your name is sacred and we honour you.

This is your world in which we live, and for that we are grateful.

Teach us to do good in the world, and to release those who anger us.

Remind us that when we share our love of you, the world can only get better.

Be with us as we seek to live the way you would have us live and the assurance that you know how difficult that can be.

Because without you we aren't much, yet with you, we have a glimpse of eternity. Thanks for hanging in there with us. Your loving children. x

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan  
Incumbent, Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry  
Christ Church Anglican & Fernie Knox United Church  
Sermon for Pentecost 7 – 24 July 2022  
Luke 11.1-13