

An Easter Prayer

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How many of you have said the “Our Father” or the “Lord’s Prayer” at some time in your life? [Pause for hands]. How many of you said the prayer as a child? [Pause for hands].

Young children may not grasp the subtle biblical language, especially if it’s taken from a version of the Bible nearly 400 years old. Here are a number of interesting, accidental versions of parts of the prayer when it comes out of “the mouths of babes”:

“Our Father, which art in heaven, how didja ya know my name?”

Or “Give us this day our jelly bread.”

Another child has been known to say, “Lead a snot into temptation.” He thought he was praying for his little sister to get into trouble!

Well, a lot of people said the prayer as children, whether they wanted to or not. Not too long ago in this country, public school classrooms would begin each day with prayer, one of the most common of which was the “Lord’s Prayer.” Even in traditions, like the one in which I grew up, that don’t have much use for set prayers, preferring extemporaneous ones, often the Lord’s prayer is a regular part of worship life.

Some of us may be familiar with the prayer from AA meetings, which sometimes include it—often to the annoyance of Jews and Agnostics. After all, it’s not exactly spiritually uplifting to be pressured to recite a prayer not part of your own belief system and to end up feeling excluded.

A common statement by many Unitarian Universalists is that they left their religion of origin when they found they could no longer in good conscience recite the creeds. One of the distinguishing characteristics of our tradition is that no creed is required of our members. Nor is anyone required to participate in or believe the words of any prayer or reading.

There are others, unfortunately, who want to effectively restore a public creed, through government-sponsored prayer. A prominent example is those who wish to have public prayer before high school football games. Sometimes, groups of them use the “Lord’s Prayer” rather

like a religious battering ram, by organizing themselves to recite it before the game, at times competing with the loudspeaker announcing the players.

It does make one wonder whether these folks ever bothered to read the verses of Matthew's gospel just *before* the so-called "Lord's Prayer." Jesus says,

whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But 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. (Matt 6:5b-6, NRSV)

What came to be known as the Lord's prayer is part of the so-called Sermon on the Mount. A main theme in the Sermon is how a fixation with the outer forms of religion can get in the way of a real spiritual life. Hence, Jesus warns his hearers not give money to charity and blow their own horns about it, not to fast and make it obvious to everyone so they can seem holier-than-thou, and not to pray to be seen, but only to be heard by God.

I regret that one of the most beautiful prayers ever uttered is sometimes used in a coercive, xenophobic way that divides people. All the more ironic in that the prayer itself is a profound meditation on human unity.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition has long emphasized the religion *of* Jesus over the religion *about* Jesus. In other words, we have been more concerned with the ethical and humanistic teachings of Jesus than the metaphysical speculations about him. It is enough for many of us to look to him as one of the wisest and most memorable of moral and spiritual exemplars, in the company of Siddhartha Gautama, Lao Tzu, Pythagoras, Socrates, Hildegard, and Ghandi, among others.

From this perspective, how might we look at Jesus' most famous prayer this Easter Sunday?

First, though, you may ask, What *is* prayer?

Well, for a humorously cynical answer, we can turn to Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary*, where we find this entry: "Pray, *v.* To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy."

This hocus-pocus aspect of prayer prompts many thinking people to call the whole enterprise into question. If there is a God, and this God indeed listens to prayers and answers them by changing natural law, then what would God make of so many contradictory requests? A farmer prays for rain and a vacationer for sun. The general on one side prays for victory over his rival, who is also praying for the same. Two women pray to marry the same man. How's God to get any peace?

But there's another view of prayer. Perhaps a Unitarian minister of the last century, Lon Ray Call, said it best: "Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people change things." Bruce Southworth, who ministers at the Community Church of New York, prefaces his prayer each Sunday with those words. Prayer as change in the self is not just a Unitarian Universalist idea, of course. William Inge, who was Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral almost a hundred years ago, said, in the language of his day, "Prayer gives a man the opportunity of getting to know a gentleman he hardly ever meets. I do not mean his maker, but himself."

Through centering our selves and going into the room of our heart, we come to know our motives, good and bad. We allow ourselves to feel joy or sorrow or any emotion we're capable of. By doing this introspection in remembrance of the highest Good we can conceive, regardless of what name we might use for it, we work on our selves. We bring into our consciousness the person we want to be and, consequently, "the world awaited becomes more nearly the world attained."

There are some of us who pray regularly, to God, Goddess, or some other form of address. But prayer sometimes takes forms that aren't so obvious.

For instance, I was at our General Assembly a few years ago, getting ready for the traditional banner parade. An elderly gentleman standing near me suddenly dropped his banner and fell to the ground in obvious need of medical assistance. After the paramedics had been called and the crowd of banner carriers waited for them to arrive, a voice softly sang, "Spirit of life, come unto me...." Then, one by one, more voices joined in singing quietly and reverently, "Spirit of Life," a hymn I would venture most of us know by heart, as he was taken away.

That, to me, is prayer. People turned their hearts toward another's good. They shared, in a small way, in his suffering. They reminded themselves of the preciousness and fragility of life, and they oriented themselves toward compassion. Whether or not there was a link between that moment of spontaneous sung prayer and what followed, who could ever say? But we were kept

informed of his condition, which did improve at the hospital. Ministers offered pastoral care to anyone who was disturbed by what had happened. And those of us who were there witnessed a moment we'll never forget.

But, what of Jesus' prayer? Or, should we say the prayer *attributed* to Jesus? The Jesus Seminar published a version of the *Five Gospels*, that is the ones in the New Testament, plus the Gospel of Thomas, not found till the 20th century. In their version, Jesus' sayings are color-coded based on the authenticity rated them by the Seminar's fellows. Their highest rating is red, which means they're pretty sure Jesus really said it. The only words they color red in the supposed Lord's Prayer are, "Our Father."

But what does it matter, ultimately, whether the words belong to Jesus? Let them stand on their own as representatives of the emphasis in both Judaism and Christianity on loving one's neighbor as one's self. As Manly P. Hall wrote, "We must regard the Light and not its bearer."

The words, "Our Father" must have impressed the Jesus Seminar as authentic because Jesus liked to refer to God as a loving parent. In his own native tongue, Aramaic, he referred to God as *Abba*, or "Daddy." If the gender doesn't work for you, disregard it. Would, "Our Mother," or "Our Parent" diminish the spirit of the prayer? I think not. But, in those two words, Jesus not only identifies God as a parent, but as *ours*. As I mentioned, the Lord's Prayer is part of the Sermon on the Mount, which reflects Jesus' public teaching. Both Galilee and Jerusalem, where Jesus taught, were quite cosmopolitan. He would have preached to many different types of people, yet he intimates that they are all sons and daughters of God.

And, rather than going into a longwinded prayer, Jesus, or whoever wrote or compiled the prayer, boils it down to a few essentials:

Hallowed be thy name

We hold in our hearts and minds our vision of the true and good, which no name can ever fully capture.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven

By recognizing true happiness through surrender of selfishness, hate, and delusion, we allow their opposites to flourish in and around us: selflessness, love, and clarity.

Give us this day our daily bread

The words can allude to both physical and spiritual bread. Let us be reminded of those who hunger this day and dedicate ourselves to their relief. All the same, let's remember those

other famous words of Jesus, “One shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” In other words, stop and listen and you just might gain wisdom. Like Lao-Tzu said, “Without going out of your house you can know all things on earth. Without looking out of your window, you can know the ways of heaven.” Secret knowledge is within you.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

Again a statement that can be taken in various senses. As one awakens to his or her common bond with every other person, guarding what’s one calls “mine” becomes less and less important. We become more willing to help others out of a bind, whether that be a financial debt or a wrong against us. As we cut other people slack, our own peace of mind increases.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Here’s where the prayer ends, as far as the Bible is concerned. The “power and glory” stuff is just “pretty for nice” as we say back in the Pennsylvania Dutch Country. For me, it’s a reminder that this world is often deceptive and mean. It takes conscious effort to live in a better way, but deliverance is possible.

Stephen Mitchell, in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, writes of the “Our Father,” “These instructions on prayer are helpful as a regular practice at the beginning stages of spiritual development, and as a reminder later on. But for those who hunger and thirst for God, even the Lord’s Prayer is insufficient, as all words ultimately are.”

Let our lives be our prayers, to whatever the ultimate may be. Let us find our own ways to align ourselves with the best within and thereby reconcile heaven and earth.

I will close with the version of the prayer we heard earlier, as reworded by Rev. Keip: Indwelling God, who art infused throughout all existence, we hallow thee with many names. Thy Kingdom is within the human heart. We accept life for all that it can be, on earth as throughout all creation. May we continue to draw sustenance from this earth, and may we receive forgiveness equal to our own. May we ever move from separation toward union, to live in grace, with love in our hearts, forever and ever. Amen.