

Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn
April 19, 2015
Theme: Faith
Sermon: Thanks, Oops, Gimme, Wow!

Call to Worship:

Our worship theme this month of April is Faith. We began with Easter. Last week we listened to our tenth graders share their Credo statements—their explorations of faith. Next week we'll hear about the experiences of faith in action when our mission trip youth and adults return from their work in New Orleans and share reflections on what it means to live out their values. Today we'll explore the meaning and power of prayer.

The Unitarian minister Jacob Trapp, in the first part of the 20th century, wrote:

If it is language that makes us human, one half of language is to listen.
Silence can exist without speech, but speech cannot live without silence.
Listen to the speech of others.
Listen even more to their silence.
To pray is to listen to the revelations of nature, to the meaning of events.

Today we will listen: to each other, to silence, to music.
We will listen for that still small voice beyond us and within us.
It is a blessing for me to be in this community of faith with my fellow people of faith:

faith strong, faith wondering,
faith bright, faith dim,
faith loud, faith quiet,
all of us seeking together for truth and meaning,
finding that here, we have found a community
we can put our faith in.

Our chalice, the symbol of our free faith, will now be lit by
Margaret Micholet.

Reading: Praying by Mary Oliver

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Sermon: Thanks, Oops, Gimme, Wow!

Here's a story so good I am just going to believe that it is true. A preacher friend of mine told it to me.

Across the street from a Baptist church,
construction began on a bar.
The Baptist church was not pleased
and they launched a campaign with petitions
and lots of prayers
in an effort to block the bar from opening.

A week before the bar was ready to open,
it was hit by lightning and burned to the ground.
The bar owner sued the church on the grounds
that the church was ultimately responsible
for the demise of his building,
and the church, in its reply to the court,
vehemently denied any connection
to the bar's sudden and smoldering end.

At the hearing, the judge said:

"I don't know how I'm going to decide this,

but it appears from the paperwork that we have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer....

And an entire church congregation that doesn't."

In Unitarian Universalist congregations, there are often a lot of people who don't necessarily "believe in" prayer.

Or at least, they aren't quite sure what they think of it.

You might be a prayer skeptic like the young person who wrote a letter in to an advice column written by the musician Andrew WK in newspaper *The Village Voice*. Andrew WK's music and art ranges from the very avant garde to the very commercial. I don't know who had the idea to give him an advice column, but it was a stroke of brilliance.

So this young person writes to Andrew WK about a terrible dilemma.¹

His brother has just been diagnosed with cancer.

The whole family is very upset,
and the grandmother tells the family
they all need to pray for the brother.

This made the letter-writer very angry.

He gets into a fight with his grandmother and family which makes him feel even worse.

His letter closes by asking Andrew:

"I need to get them to see that praying and religious mumbo jumbo doesn't help. How do I explain this to them?" Signed, "Not Gonna Pray."

Andrew WK begins his response by writing,

Dear Not Gonna Pray,
I'm deeply sorry to hear about your brother's diagnosis. I'm sending you my thoughts, and my heart goes out to your brother and your whole family.

¹ All selections are from Andrew WK's column can be found here:

http://blogs.villagevoice.com/music/2014/09/ask_andrew_wk_on_prayer.php

Guess what? That was me praying for you.

I think the idea of “praying” is
a lot less complicated,
a lot more powerful,
and a little different than you may realize.

Andrew WK is on to something.

We can pray by just patching
a few words together
not trying to make them elaborate,
this isn't a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

What is this other voice? A lot of UUs get hung up on what prayer is
because we are hung up on what God is...or isn't.

There is a classic UU minister line that goes, “Tell me about the God you
don't believe in, because I probably don't believe in that God either.”

Last Sunday I heard several of our youth say in their Credo statements: “I
don't believe in God.”
But then they described what they meant by that word “God”: An old white
man in the sky.

Well, I don't believe in that definition of God either.

Honestly, I would guess that not one person in this room believes that God
exists in the precise and singular form of an old white man in the sky.
Who perhaps looks like George Burns.

(But I'm tempting fate by saying that because if I know anything about UU
congregations,
it is that we have a great diversity of belief,
so now I've just started a ticking countdown
until someone comes to shake my hand after the service and tell me all about
how God's true nature
is definitely an old white man in the sky.

To you I will say, let's read some Tillich together.)

The cool thing many of our youth did last week,
was that after they said they don't believe in
an old man in the sky,
they would then go on to say what they *do* believe in—
and for many of them, it was a description quite similar to my understanding
of God.

They talked about the magnificence of the Universe.
They talked about the importance of the love
they gave and received from friends, family and teammates
and experiencing a special feeling of connectedness, reverence and love
when they were alone,
walking somewhere in nature.
They spoke about how there are so many things like
luck and chance and reason and physics,
Things that we can't see,
but that they believe in nonetheless.

All of that sounds a lot like "God" to me.

God is just a nickname for everything that we don't know.
Everything beyond us and larger than our human minds can comprehend.
Everything we know we don't know.

We humans have a hard time with big abstract ideas like that, so we use
images and metaphors to bring this big idea down to a size we can hold onto.
We might imagine this powerful force of love
as a warm father God or a strong mother God.
We might imagine this creative spirit
as a brave young Jewish man born thousands of years ago.
We might imagine this great mystery
as a monster made out of spaghetti that can fly.²

You know, the human imagination is a wonderful thing. We just have to
have the humility to know that our image of God is not God.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster

Similarly we can widen our understanding of prayer.

Just pay attention,
patch a few words together
give thanks,
be silent.

Andrew WK, in his letter to *Not Gonna Pray*, goes on to tell the young person that prayer is a type of thought, a kind of meditation, but that there is an X-factor in prayer: humility.

It is the knowledge that we are faced with situations we cannot control. We cannot know or determine the outcome. Our own privilege or luck cannot save us. And there is so much we don't know, will never know.

When our youth spoke, I noticed that many of them had this X-factor of humility.

They left room for doubt and agnosticism, the knowledge that we don't know everything, there are lots of things we can't see or understand, and that we can't predict how our life experiences will change us or our beliefs.

Andrew WK writes:

Being humble is very hard for many people because it makes them feel unimportant and helpless. To embrace our own smallness is not to say we're dumb or that we don't matter, but to realize how amazing it is that we exist at all in the midst of so much more. ...

My first prayers as a child were wordless experiences of feeling small in the midst of so much more, a feeling of intense joy that I was alive and awake and connected to everything.

I have told you before about how, as a young child on a vacation to the beach, I stood in front of the Atlantic Ocean and realized how enormous the globe was,

reaching out beyond the horizon, curving away from me, and how small I and all the people on the beach were in the face of this vastness. The horizon was simply the limit of my sight—there was so much more out there I couldn't see. When I told my parents about these mystical moments I said I could feel “the roundness of the earth.”

I wasn't saying a prayer out loud to God;
I wouldn't even have used the word God then;
but I was praying just the same, standing at

the doorway
into thanks, finding a silence in which
another voice could speak,
in the midst of so much more.

One common way to describe different kinds of prayer uses four categories:³

Thanks! Oops! Gimme! Wow!

Thanks, a prayer of gratitude;
oops, the prayer of confession;
gimme, the prayer of request;
wow, the prayer of praise.

Anne Lamott has said there are really only two prayers: “Thank you, thank you, thank you” and “Help me, help me, help me.”

There is no one right way to pray.
In one Jewish wisdom story, a frustrated rabbi asked his fellow rabbi if he could teach him how to pray.

“I'm so envious,” he said.
“You pray for three hours each day and, as a result, you are refreshed and nourished and sustained by your praying... When I try to pray for three hours, I get anxious, my mind wanders and I become irritable and wind up just feeling discouraged.”

³ “The Right Way to Pray?” Zev Chafets, *New York Times Magazine*, September 16, 2009
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/20/magazine/20Prayer-t.html?_r=1&sq=Zev%20Chafets&st=nyt&scp=1&pagewanted=all

The older rabbi said,
“Yes, I can teach you how to pray. It’s simple.

Just pray as you can, and not as you can’t.”⁴

It doesn’t have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones

this isn’t a contest
but a doorway.

Pray as you can, not as you can’t.

When I pray, I’m usually looking for
some kind of peace in my heart,
the seeds of forgiveness or hope or courage.

The times that I have found myself praying for a desired outcome,
by the time I am done praying,
I sometimes find that the outcome has become less important.
I end up praying for the strength to see through
whatever outcome I am faced with.
The God I believe in is all-loving, and all-good,
but not all-powerful.
God does not test me with pain and cannot take my pain away.
Like our youth, I believe in medicine and physics.

But when I am open in prayer,
God is my companion through pain,
God weeps at my suffering, gives me hope,
And reminds me that I am loved.
And that is powerfully healing.

I can bow my head knowing
there is so much I don’t know,
and yet no matter how small I am,

⁴ This saying was popularized by Dom John Chapman, heard this story in a sermon by Phyllis O’Connell.

it is truly amazing to be alive here
in the midst of so much more.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote:

Prayer is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing. When I am fully alert to whatever or whoever is right in front of me; when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive; when I am able to give myself wholly to the moment I am in, then I am in prayer. Prayer is happening, and it is not necessarily something I am doing. God is happening, and I am lucky enough to know that I am in The Midst.⁵

Reinhold Neibuhr said: “Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people change things.”

At the end of Andrew WK’s advice letter, he challenges the person who wrote him.

He gives the angry letter writer some directions,
and maybe you can follow along,
replacing the letter writer and his brother
with whoever you are worried about,
or whatever care or concern is in your heart right now.
He writes:

I want you to close your eyes and think of one concentrated thought:
your brother.
I want you to think of your love for him.
Your fear of him dying.
Your feeling of powerlessness.
Your feelings of anger and frustration.
Your feelings of confusion.
You don’t need to ask to get anything.
You don’t need to try and fix anything.
You don’t need to get any answers.
Just focus on every moment you’ve ever had with your brother.
Reflect on every memory, from years ago, and even from just earlier
today.

⁵ *Ibid.* pg 177.

Let the feelings wash over you.
Let the feelings take you away from yourself.
Let them bring you closer to him. [...]
Let yourself be overwhelmed.
Think about how incredible it is that you have a brother—that he exists at all.
Focus on him until you feel like your soul is going to burst.
Tell him in your heart and soul that you love him.
Feel that love pouring out of you from all sides.
Then get up
and go be with him and your family.
And you can tell your grandmother that you prayed for your brother.
Love,
Andrew W.K.

Just pay attention.
Let the feelings wash over you.
Listen to the silence.
Patch a few words together—or don't.

Pray as you can, not as you can't.

This is the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

May your doorway give you entrance into
The Midst of So Much More.

And may the voice you hear be the voice of Love.

Amen.