

# *Some Thoughts*

# *on Prayer*

**by Jack Price  
Senior Pastor  
Crossroads Church  
September, 2008**

## What is prayer?

Prayer is always a mystical encounter with the numinous. It may be a profound emotional high and it may not be at all. A mountain-top experience, referring to Jesus' transfiguration, may happen many times in your lifetime. It may only happen once and it may not happen at all. A spiritual experience is a time of life clarity. A spiritual experience is not so much a time of decision as a time of vision. In it, we can see "the promised land," though we may spend a lifetime "unpacking" such an experience.

The gospel writers agree on this: don't set up a tent at the sight of your mystical experiences. They happen and we move on. They can serve as touchstone, but they are not where we live our lives. C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* provides a helpful illustration of this insight. At the conclusion of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the children discovered that some of them might one day return to Narnia. If they did, however, they would not enter through the wardrobe again. Narnia is never entered the same way twice. Our experiences of the numinous mystical presence are seldom repeated, not in same way.

Bishop John Shelby Spong came to Kansas City a few years ago. He reminded us that we often experience the numinous in ways that are no less mystical because they seem so ordinary. We experience God by learning to perceive God's "footprints" and God's tracings in life. We experience this presence by observing the wonders of creation and by being aware of life's bias toward wholeness and healing. We experience the numinous as we affirm that life moves us to transcend ourselves, to envision a self better than we are and strive to make it so.

God meets us in still a more personal way. We encounter God within ourselves. The Hebrew word for wind (*ruach*) and for breath (*nephish*) are both powerful images of God. They remind us God is not an alien being, innately present, and closer than our breath; in our life's breath itself.

Finally, God meets us as we experience the mystical presence in our experience of love: in loving and being in love. True love gets us out of ourselves. Jesus is our model. The writer of the epistle 1 John states this profound truth (1John 4: 7-8): "Love is of God and everyone who loves is born of God ... for God is love." Love is a powerful image for God. Our experience of giving and receiving love is an experience of the numinous, the mystical and holy.

## Prayer is self-discovery

Identity is basic to discipleship. Israel's identity is "the one who belongs to Yahweh," who are "called by my name." There is a wonderful spiritual, "I've got a new name and it's over in Zion." This idea of being "re-named" by God is throughout scripture. In Genesis, Jacob, whose name means "deceiver and supplanter," was changed to Israel and the Old Testament is the story of his children. Kansas author Marlo Morgan writes of her experience in a walkabout with an Australian Aboriginal tribe in the book *Mutant Message Down Under*:

"At birth is named at birth, but it is understood that as a person develops, the birth name will be outgrown, and the individuals will select for themselves a more appropriate greeting. Hopefully, one's name will change several times in a lifetime as wisdom, creativity, and purpose also become more clearly defined with time."

Each of us has a unique name, known only to God and to each person (Revelation 2: 17). Being named and renamed by God is all wrapped up with the idea of authentic self -- who and what we were born to be. God's name for you and me, for us together, is our identity as God's child, God's children, and God's people. Our family name comes from the name we heard so much during the Advent and Christmas season -- Emmanuel". We are the ones whom "God with us" is with.

God names us uniquely and individually to empower us for our ministry. God names us and our task is to discover who we are. Our life is one long naming, a process of calling into being. Thomas Merton calls

authentic self a “deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation.” We find our identity, our unique name, through disciplined discipleship on the inward and outward journey. Merton then says that most of us will not discover “that mysterious and unknown ‘self’ until death.”

## **Prayer is partnership**

One helpful way of seeing the world is as a partnership with God. This image is a way of understanding why we should pray. Creation is a blend of the material and the spiritual. As human beings, we have both a physical and a spiritual dimension. Systems and institutions of humanity also blend the material and spiritual. There is a measure of freedom that seems basic to our nature as well. We often call this free will. It refers to a belief that the creator God respects the right and responsibility of people both to make choices and to deal with the consequences of those choices. From the perspective of faith, we say that even when individuals get off-track in terms of values and mission, still God respects our free will. When human institutions and systems get off-track in terms of values and mission, still God respects their free will.

We are individuals and human systems living in partnership with God. We are also primary actors in the ongoing work of creation. The idea that we have gotten off-track in our values and our mission is difficult to refute when we look at ourselves -- at the injustice and innocent suffering in our world and the divisions in our humanity. You might say that prayer is the conference room where God meets us. Prayer is a spiritual discipline, the ongoing conversation through which we grow and maintain relationship with God. Prayer is the discipline we practice to develop self-awareness and to discover the power of our partnership with God.

Prayer is where life is lived. When we pray for others, we are living the hope of the future. We are actually placing ourselves in the present reign of God’s kingdom – heaven. Prayer changes things. Prayer changes us. It is our preparation for life and the primary battlefield on which our life’s struggles are fought, before we ever encounter them outside ourselves. Prayer changes the world since we are part of that world. Community prayer changes the corporate atmosphere of institutions, including churches.

Prayer, in some mystical way, changes what is possible to God. God’s abilities don’t change, but what is possible for God changes because of prayer. Human choices control our world. The systemic dysfunction we call the powers of darkness results from human choice. Our choices, along with those of all people throughout history, have resulted in the powers of darkness being in control of this world.

So, we return to the powerful theological understanding that we are partners with God. The vision for this partnership is the redeeming of persons and the redeeming of the powers: the systems, the institutions at whose heart lies spirit. God does the redeeming. We help through the imperatives of prayer. When we pray, we request God to act and we commit ourselves to participate. We are engaged in an act of co-creation in which one little sector of the universe rises up and becomes translucent, incandescent, a vibratory center of power that radiates the power of the universe.

## **How should we pray?**

*The Lord’s Prayer* contains statements that seem to give God instructions. Almost every statement is imperative, like a command. *Hallowed be your name! Kingdom, come! Give daily bread! Forgive our sin! Don’t bring us to trial!* It’s almost as though we are ordering God! Theologian Walter Wink suggests that God commands us to command God, orders us to insist on these things. (Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be*, 186). How can we order God? This idea only really makes sense when we remember that ours is not the first voice in prayer. Our prayer is a response to the movement of the Spirit who urges us to be urgent in prayer. Our role is central because our passion and commitment are crucial. Our faithfulness in prayer is irreplaceable.

How does this work? One of the ways prayer works is by changing us. Our openness to the *Spirit connection* and the faithfulness with which we pray affects our approach to living. Prayer opens spaces within our lives for God to act and God acts along the lines of our prayer. Another way prayer works is in our partnership with God. Naturally, God is the senior partner whose vision and will are determinative for us. God works with and through each person according to our unique giftedness, our unique focus, and our willingness to pray.

We live in a world full of need – for healing, for justice, for meaning, for truth, for food and medicine, for inclusion and for love. As we allow ourselves to become aware of these overwhelming needs, they move through our minds and hearts. They are impossible for us to fix. All we can do is send all of them to God in prayer. Then, we let them go, trusting God to be God. And God sends back to each of us the particular dimension of need and possibility that exactly corresponds to our unique identity and giftedness – the need that's got *our name on it*.

There are risks in prayer. The risk factor goes up as our prayers get more specific. Each of us will have to answer for ourselves how specific we are willing to be in prayer. I am finding the willingness to be very concrete and specific in my praying is bringing a new intensity to my prayer life. Prayer is not a magical grab bag for wishes. Sometimes I wish it were. Sometimes the things I pray for don't happen. Sometimes I understand why and sometimes I don't. I believe that prayer is a mystical connection through which God is changing the world. There is power and understanding that is not ours.

How we pray, our ability and talent in prayer, is not a factor in prayer's effectiveness. It doesn't really matter whether or not we use the right words or that we're good enough or spiritual enough. What is vital is that we pray. Any amount of faith that we bring to prayer is enough for God to use. God's nature, God's power, and God's faithfulness are all that matters in whatever space we open.

God always gives the Holy Spirit. The Spirit always brings healing and wholeness. It's not our ability or piety that makes prayer effective, but rather our willingness to pray. What really matters is God being God-like. Why, then, should we pray? Prayer is the power of a connectedness with God that can change the world. Prayer affects the life of the one who prays. Your prayer opens a space in your life for the Spirit to move to transform the world, to transform individual lives, and to transform you and me. We help bring the *Kingdom of God* from invisible to visible reality. It happens little by little through individual people of faith.

## **Prayer and free will**

The Christian faith tradition out of which I come believes that God respects human initiative and the free exercise of human will. This means that God acts when we open the space. Praying, then, is inseparable from doing and doing is inseparable from praying. The results of praying are growth and transformation. For individuals, praying brings transformation and spiritual growth. For humanity, prayer brings social transformation and reform.

Prayer is life beyond our understanding. It is a mysterious connection. Prayer is action, a mystical channel through which God touches and transforms the world. When you pray, first listen and then speak in words that reveal themselves through the open channel of your life. The Spirit moves through you and into you and there is prayer. God's kingdom comes in you and through you, and prayer continues, and God's will is done.

Faith is trusting that God can do something. Faith is cooperating with God and supporting God's efforts. Prayer is one way to put our faith into action. Prayer is a matter of truly wanting social justice, of universal inclusion of those who are outcasts, and of loving our enemy. Prayer involves more than just God and us. Prayer includes the systems and powers of darkness of our world. Free will is in play all around. We have the

choice to cooperate in God's purpose – or not. Every single human being has that same choice to be selfish – or not. The systems that control so much of this world likewise have the choice to respect persons or to exploit them.

Faith tells us that God hears our prayers right away, but the response is delayed by the failure of individuals and institutions to act in cooperation with God's vision for creation – justice, mercy, and loving relationship with God. Perhaps God is waiting on us to respond – waiting for us to hear the prayers of the hungry and the outcast. Can it be that God is asking us, “How long will you cooperate with systemic injustice and greed in the world?” Only God can redeem people and systems. God apparently does so only with our help.