

“What is prayer?”

James 3:13-4:3
Jack Price and Jody Thatch

Jack’s Perspective

What is prayer? We’ve talked about this before and still it’s a question with no clear and objective answer? The very nature of prayer resist being reduced to one thing. The truth of prayer is thick, filled with rich, complex, and multi-faceted meaning – and some contradictions.

To the question about what prayer is -- it’s lots of things. Prayer is an event of making our needs, requests, and concerns known to God (who already knows them). Prayer is an action of trying to direct, change, and influence God to act in certain ways toward certain ends. Prayer is a conversation: listening and responding. It is a strategy room for dealing with life before you have to actually deal with it! (Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be*) It is a partnership for realizing our dreams within God’s dream.

Prayer is a process of holding ourselves awake to our shared life with God, our presence as individual persons and communities of persons in God. It is the process of a person being as honest with her/himself as possible, of opening ourselves like the aperture of a camera to allow God’s light to shine, God’s Spirit to flow, through us into the world. It is an attitude of seeking the awareness of God’s presence in each of us and between all of us. Prayer is aligning our thoughts with what is Ultimate, of being present and being in the present.

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 (in heaven) now! 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 prayer is a mystical connection through which God is changing the world. There is a power and understanding that is not ours.

What does prayer do? How does it work? Prayer changes things. It changes us as a result of our openness to *Spirit connection*. The faithfulness with which we pray affects our approach to living. Prayer changes the world since we are part of that world. Our common prayer changes the corporate atmosphere of institutions -- including churches.

Prayer, in a mystical way, actually changes what is possible to God. God’s abilities don’t change, 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 and those of all people throughout history have resulted in the powers of darkness being in control of this world. Prayer opens spaces within our lives for God to act and God acts along the lines of our prayer. (from Wink) God works with and through each person according to our unique giftedness, our unique focus, and our willingness to pray.

So, we return to the powerful theological understanding that we are partners with God. We share the life of God. We also share the vision for this partnership, this oneness: of redeeming persons and redeeming 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, and a vibratory center of power that radiates the power of the universe. (Wink)

We live in a world full of need: for healing, justice, meaning, truth, food and medicine, for inclusion, and for love. As we allow ourselves to become aware of these needs, they can feel overwhelming. So we let them move through our minds and hearts, but not hold on to them. They are impossible for us to fix. We send all of them to God in prayer and let them go, trusting God to be God. Then God sends back to each of us the particular dimension of need and possibility that exactly corresponds to us our unique identity and giftedness – the need that’s got *our name on it*.

How we pray, our ability or 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, power, and faithfulness are all that matters in whatever space we open.

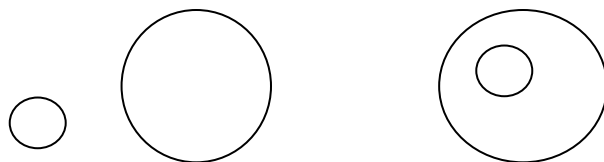
Christian tradition asserts that God respects human initiative and the free exercise of human will. God acts when we open the space. Therefore, praying is inseparable from doing and doing is inseparable from praying. The results of praying are growth and transformation. For individuals, praying brings transformation and spiritual growth. For humanity, prayer brings social transformation and reform.

Jody’s Perspective

I have been wondering what would be useful to say about prayer in a room full of people who have had a variety of experiences and understandings about prayer. I love talking about ways of praying and spiritual practices, but it seemed to me that what matters most to me these days is experiencing God as hospitable and welcoming. Prayer isn’t what we do so much as seeing who we are.

From the time I was in grade school, I tried to have a quiet time of prayer and study, and was never successful. I had many starts and stops, with long gaps between. During one of these long gaps of not having a quiet time, I really wanted to “come back” to God, but I felt embarrassed and sheepish about just jumping back into my prayer time as though I didn’t owe God anything or that I had a right to pick up the relationship whenever I wanted after so much neglect. I really imagined God sitting, drumming his fingers on a tabletop, saying, “So, where have you been?” Even though I could say this was silly and not true, it was my felt experience. Finally, I just sat down, got quiet and said, “Here I am; sorry I’ve been neglecting you.” Instead of a reprimand, I heard God say, “I’m so glad you’re here!” I thought God was a welcoming God rather than one who makes you pay, but this experience helped move it into reality for me.

It’s like that song we sing, “I’m trading my sorrow for the joy of the Lord.” I traded in an image of God who is slightly disappointed in me all the time for an image of God who is welcoming and hospitable. I thought of this little illustration that somewhat represents what I’ve traded and am trading.



This first picture represents the old image, the receding image: I’m here and God is there. Praying, in this picture is a matter of getting God’s attention, or of pulling my attention around to

God. I'm trading this in for the other picture where I am within God. I don't have to get to God, but am already there. This has been and continues to be a process.

I like the story of the spiritual teacher who tells his student that there is nothing he can do to make God be with him, any more than he can do anything to make the sun rise. The student asks then why do we do the spiritual exercises. Ah, the teacher says, so we will not be asleep when the sun rises.

The quiet times aren't to make God like us better, or to avoid displeasing God. The quiet times are so I can practice what is most true—that I am God's beloved and all is within God. In the separate circles, awareness is a matter of getting somewhere—into God's presence. In the other circles, awareness is waking up to where I already am—living, moving, being in God, aware or not.

Over the years as my theology changed, it put some tension on my praying. There was a time I stopped praying, because it was just too hard to figure out. That was another trade I ended up making: I traded in figuring it out for practicing. Looking back I see it was a part of the process of moving from being someone who prays to being someone who is a pray-er. We did business cards recently for Jonathan Price. On his card he listed various kinds of music, but under his name it says "singer." Jonathan isn't someone who sings. He is a singer, and music—all kinds of music—comes out from him. And because he is a singer, he works at it, practices it, performs it, studies it, shares it, grows in it. We can see ourselves as people who pray, or we can shift just a little and see ourselves as pray-ers, and prayer arise from that. Indeed, our lives become the prayer.

Consider your own journey or process of prayer. I am not inviting you to begin—you have all already begun—but to consider where you are in your journey. The God of Christianity, the God Jesus called "Daddy," is a relational God. We are called into a relationship with God.

Relationships are dynamic and the communication between the parties is dynamic, meaning it changes. As the friendship deepens and expands, the communication deepens and expands. It makes sense to me that our understanding and practice of prayer changes as we grow and mature.

A contemplative would say we are called to wake up to the relationship we already have with God. A contemplative is someone who practices waking up. Richard Rohr and others say we are all called to be contemplatives.

I considered this passage in James, I felt again the invitation to see it in light of this first relationship model: God telling us through scripture what to do to please God and how to be good Christians. My side of the conversation is something between "I do such a bad job of this" and "Boy, this is sure an indictment of all those greedy capitalists out there." Both those things may be true. But the other model, of being in God, is the way I understand my relationship with God. Not God from without, judging me, or slightly disappointed in me; but me finding myself in God and seeing how things look from that vantage point. We've talked before that prayer isn't one of the thousands of things we have to do, but how we do the thousands of things. When I see myself "in God" and look at this passage, I experience God looking at it with me. Somehow it seems fuller.

Lectio divina is a prayer practice of letting scripture draw you into the awareness of being in God. When I did lectio using this passage, I was drawn to the phrase "peacemakers who sow in peace." This isn't about going around trying to do peacemaking things. This is about being a

peacemaker. The doing—sowing in peace—arises out of being a peacemaker. Our focus, then, is less on figuring out and doing peacemaking things and more on doing whatever it takes to become and be a peacemaker. Our focus is less on figuring out how to pray and more on doing whatever it takes to be a pray-er, someone who is awake, whose perspective is from within the awareness of being in God.

It's not about prayer mastery or prayer proficiency, but prayer practice. And the practice leads me not to proficiency but to relationship, to seeing myself for who I truly am, as God sees me, as God's beloved. And when I catch glimpses of that I see that every person is God's beloved. Everyone belongs inside the circle.

Jack's Summary

Prayer is our life beyond our understanding. It is a mysterious connection, a mystical channel through which God touches and transforms the world. When you pray, listen then speak in words and feelings that reveal themselves through the open channel of your life. 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.

Prayer involves more than just God and us. It 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 the same choice: to be selfish – or not. The systems and powers 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, we're in God and God's in us, 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 excluded. Can it be that God is asking us, "How long will you cooperate with injustice and greed in the world?" Only God can redeem people and systems. God apparently does so only with our help, our commitment, and our involvement.

Jody's Call to Action

Jack has invited each of us to meet with him and tell him our dreams. As we planned this sermon, I ended up talking to him about my dream, that church could be a place to explore corporately being pray-ers. Every year we set objectives for the coming year and then establish work groups at our retreat. I wonder what it would be like to set an objective that said we would focus on prayer for a whole year. What would it be like to intentionally take a year to be a place that holds and supports individuals as they seek to deepen and expand in their practice of prayer. Within the presence of God who is hospitable and welcoming, it could be quite a journey.