

What I wished for

Sometimes we can't express what we want, even when we are in desperate need.

by [Yolanda Pierce](#) in the [March 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Eric Nyquist)

The birthday candle on my cupcake was flickering brightly. The traditional birthday song had been sung, as well as the Stevie Wonder version, and all I needed to do was to make that critical birthday wish and blow out the candle.

The wax was melting fast, and my family and friends were waiting, but my silent wish was hard to articulate, even to myself. I did not know how to ask, how to express my deepest desires and longings, or how to frame my contradictory set of needs before the candle melted into a pile of goo on my delicious cupcake. What were the right words, in ten seconds or less, for this once-a-year wish? As I finally blew out the candle, all I could think of was an expression I had spoken earlier when I struggled with the right words to pray: “God, you know my heart.”

Prayer is a critical component of a life of faith. It is intimate conversation with the Divine, a time of confession and forgiveness. Our prayers can be a period of lament

and mourning or of celebration and praise. Our prayers are acts of thanksgiving and gratitude as well as requests and petitions. We can confidently expect that our prayers are heard and known before God.

And yet, when there is sustained silence or a lack of response to our prayers, we begin to doubt. In seasons of despair and grief, when our prayers seem unheard, we wonder if we are seen or if we have been forgotten. Sometimes our prayer language fails us and all the scripture, liturgies, expressions, and clichés of religion seem trite and stale. How do you pray when you lack the words, the ability, or even the belief?

A few days after my birthday, I heard a song that was one of my childhood favorites, a song composed by my enslaved ancestors and handed down through the generations: “It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord, / Standing in the need of prayer.”

These are not particularly profound lyrics. There is no deep exegesis or scriptural analysis contained within the few lines of the song. There are not really even verses to sing. It is a call-and-response tune, initially meant to be sung outside, without accompaniment, while working in the fields. I can imagine the deep pathos and pain which prompted its initial composition, as men and women confined to a lifetime of bondage somehow found the courage and strength to call on God’s mercy, to cry out in their need and sorrow. It is a song that is a plea not to be forgotten, as well as a call for divine intervention in their circumstances.

In my childhood church, when we would sing this song, we did so without a preamble at the beginning or any distinctive ending. We would sing it, sometimes alternating soloists, but with these same lyrics repeating again and again: “It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord, / Standing in the need of prayer.” The repetition forced a powerful reminder that it was you—not the deacon or the preacher, not your brother or your sister, not your father or your mother—just *you* in need of prayer.

It is a song in which the naked self, stripped of these relational identifiers, stands in need. It is a song that reminds you that even when your words fail, when you cannot express your own desires, you can simply tell God that you are in need. By the midpoint of the song, almost every member of the church stood on their feet, each individually in need of specific answers to specific prayers which remained unarticulated for the rest of the congregation.

There are times when we cannot express what we want, despite being in desperate need. There are times when our longings consume us, even though we cannot

identify the separate parts of our desires. We are starving but don't know what food to put in our mouths to stifle the hunger. We are thirsty but too parched to even ask for water.

What should we pray for when we are both lonely and also overwhelmed by people? How should we petition when we feel too weak for the task at hand but too strong to ask for help? What do we say when we want to move forward but also fear losing that which we must leave behind? How do we forgive when there hasn't been any attempt at restoration? How can we love when we are met with violence?

In the face of all our contradictory needs and deepest longings, we can begin by crying out that we stand in the need of prayer—that we need prayer like we need the air we breathe. In doing so, we admit our dependency on an intimate relationship with the Divine. Secondly, while the prayers of others are powerful and righteous, we each need our own prayer life. When there is no one else to intercede on our behalf, we need to stand boldly, with our beliefs and our doubts, before God for our own selves. And finally, like the song or the secret birthday wish, we don't necessarily have to share or speak our needs aloud or to others. God knows our hearts, knows the deepest recesses of our innermost parts, and still loves us with an everlasting love.