Power line: Learning to pray

by Marilyn McEntyre in the September 9, 2008 issue

Prayer (I)

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;

Engine against th' Almightie, sinner's towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six daies world-transposing in an houre,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;

Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,

Church-bels beyond the stars heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices, something understood.

—George Herbert

Buried deep in the *Norton Anthology*, George Herbert's little poem with the unpretentious title "Prayer" is easy to miss. Decorously contained on a half-page with regular rhyme and punctuation, it seems at first glance to be the sort of poem a pious 17th-century country parson might be expected to write—a courteous reiteration of theological truths upon which the Sunday faithful may happily agree. But if your glance lingers a little longer, you will find yourself ambushed by metaphors that will not let you go until they bless you. Over 20 of them in 12 lines, every one offering a different way to think about what exactly we enter into when we pray.

Prayer is “the Churches banquet,” an idea that brings together word and sacrament in a phrase: in prayer we get our nourishment for the journey; in the church with its rich liturgical legacy, that food for the soul is preserved and prepared. Prayer, another line claims, is “Gods breath in man returning to his birth”—our whispered petitions a movement as natural as the ebb tide drawn back to sea. Prayer takes the measure of all things as “the Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth.” It is also, shockingly, an “engine against th’Almightie”—an armed tank coming at the divine adversary, who stands undaunted in its path. Every image opens an avenue of reflection on the mysterious business: prayer is music and manna and “the soul’s bloud,” and finally, simply, “something understood.” As metaphor is a means of understanding, so is prayer, though it defies rational analysis.

The range of Herbert’s images offers some indication of how many ways there are to enter into prayer. We get some sense of that variety in the Psalms, where we learn how capacious is the conversation to which we are invited by an infinite God, who is inexplicably interested in our small selves. From the Psalms we learn praise and imprecation, lamentation and the deep lullaby that allows us to “lie down and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety” (Ps. 4:8). Some psalms, like this one, bring us into direct address. Others turn us outward in proclamation, backward in commemoration or inward in reflection.

Given the range of forms, uses and attitudes of prayer, the poverty of a monochromatic prayer life seems tragic and wasteful: at the risk of sounding too pragmatic, prayer could be serving many more functions for most of us than we allow it to. Praying brings our attention to the fact that God is present, and makes the spot of ground on which we stand into holy ground. It quiets and focuses the mind; it clarifies intention; it awakens the imagination—a powerful tool of worship and compassion—it opens up the heart and even the lungs, as we breathe more deeply and slowly and relax into this most intimate of encounters. As a communal practice, praying creates consensus and convergence of focus, teaching us how to be the body of Christ, speaking, at least for one moment, with one voice and one hope.

In a world where power has become almost synonymous with violence and greed, the power of prayer is one of the church’s best-kept open secrets. Christians who live where bombs fall in the streets and warlords bear weapons into the marketplace know the power of prayer more vividly and practically than most of us who know the securities of an affluent culture. People who know that prayer is the last resort may

also teach us why it should be the first. Christians stand to learn a great deal not only from each other, crossing denominational lines with “generous orthodoxy,” but also from those who pray in other traditions.

Philip and Carol Zaleski begin their book *Prayer*: *A History* with a startling survey of who prays and how:

> a recovering alcoholic reciting the Serenity Prayer, a Catholic nun telling her beads, a child crossing himself before a meal, a quaking Shaker, a meditating yogini, a Huichol Indian chewing a peyote button, a Zen monk in satori, a Lubavitcher dancing with the Torah, Saint Francis receiving the stigmata, a bookie crossing his fingers before the final race, Ebenezer Scrooge pleading for just one more chance, dear God, just one more chance.

Their point is not simply to document or celebrate the variety of human invention, but to remind us, as Herbert did, how many are the avenues of grace that can lead us into the presence of God. Among those they cite are Tibetans who make prayer wheels from “cast-off plastic Pepsi-Cola bottles.” This image itself is a kind of parable: our prayers rise up out of our dungheaps and landfills; the inclination toward the Creator survives even in the midst of the mess we have made of creation.

To look upon those prayer wheels not (as some of us were taught) as instruments of “vain repetition,” but as outward and visible signs of the intention to pray without ceasing, can perhaps lead iconoclasts to more compassionate reflection on the sacramental impulse and on the place of objects—statues and stained glass and candles and altar cloths, beads, bouquets, and kneeling cushions in needlepoint stitched by some faithful woman as her own act of participation in the prayers of the church.

But even with those aids, prayer practices may lapse or become perfunctory. In those times, if we pray at all, the suspicion that we could be doing it better leads us back to the disciples’ poignant petition, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Help us “get it.” Help us understand not only how to pray, but how to stay at it. Deepen for us the experience and the effects of prayer.

An answer to that petition came for me some years ago when a Quaker friend invited me to meet regularly with a small group to share prayer practices. When I asked her what had prompted her to bring us together, she said simply, “I want to learn how other people do it.” Part of our purpose was to give one another permission to ask very nosy and practical questions about what “worked.” Prayer that works, I learned, is prayer that yields clarity, or insight, or a course of action, or leaves you more accepting of uncertainty. It can work by opening your heart in spite of yourself, or by enabling you suddenly to imagine a point of view other than the one you’ve been clinging to. It can loosen your grip on all manner of cherished plans and problems. It can make you laugh—a laughter that brings both release and trust that indeed, “all shall be well.”

One of the dimensions of prayer that bemused me then, and still does, is intercession. I am much more inclined by temperament and training toward contemplative practices that allow me to find silence and rest in God’s presence. Intercession is strenuous. So I am fascinated by people who do it intentionally and consistently. When they offer to pray for me, they ask for specifics. They keep prayer lists. They want to know exactly how to focus their petitions—as though they’re concerned about where to aim the laser beam. Their sense of prayer as service and intervention seems every bit as practical as a nurse’s knowledge that caregiving requires practical understanding of the patient’s condition. Effective intercessors know themselves to be bearers of something precious when they receive others’ sorrow or hope or confusion and carry it into the presence of God. They go there in our stead. They pray when we can’t. They make our business their business—surely one of the ways in which membership in the body of Christ sets us apart from a culture in which minding your own business has acquired the status of a virtue.

One friend for whom I promised to pray as his wife was dying said to me in a moment of spiritual exhaustion, “You pray. I can’t. I’ll just have to rely on others to pray for now.” And so he did. His reply has stayed with me as an encouragement to pray for those unable or unwilling to pray for themselves, invoking the privilege we enjoy as members of one body to count for as well as count on each other in asking for what we need.

One of Jesus’ most memorable directives about prayer is the simple mandate, “Ask and you shall receive.” It is easy to forget the importance of asking, for two reasons: 1) God knows what we need, so asking can seem like pointless redundancy, and 2)

asking doesn’t obviate the necessity of planning and working to get our needs met. But of course neither objection is the point. Asking keeps us in relationship to the One who gives, aware of what comes to us, even apparently by our own efforts, as gift.

A little sentence that came to me in prayer has helped me learn to be less timid about asking and receiving: “Let yourself be blessed.” This simple act of allowing is harder than it seems. I suspect I’m not alone in feeling conflicted about my blessings. I don’t understand why I’m blessed in ways others aren’t—with health, prosperity, pleasures, life itself, and so I fall easily into uneasy, free-floating guilt that dilutes gratitude. It is easy to confuse salutary self-denial with a spiritual parsimoniousness that mistakes all abnegation for virtue.

Throughout the Gospels we find evidence that our concern is to be with the concrete particulars of life. We are not to intellectualize in a way that removes our focus from the very practical concerns of tending the sick, caring for the vulnerable, participating in community life (like Calvin, who concerned himself with the sewage systems in Geneva) or voting, getting the car fixed, recycling old newspapers, making meals.

The call to deal in particulars extends to thanksgiving as well as petition. Thanksgiving seems such a simple matter—a spontaneous overflow of relief, or a habit of daily recognition that we continue to receive God’s good gifts. Actually, thanksgiving is as much a discipline to be learned as any other form of prayer. It can carry us into places of great depth if we are willing to take seriously Paul’s instruction to give thanks in everything. Thanksgiving, like confession, provides a needed corrective in a culture where rights are so central to the social contract. In the political order, there are few concepts as important as basic human rights, and our obligation to protect them, especially where they are being grossly violated, is a primary ethical concern. Still, a deeper truth is that we have what we have from the hand of the Lord, who “giveth and taketh away.” Those terms are the terms not of the social contract, but of a covenant.

For many people the hardest thing about learning to pray is finding time, space, privacy, quiet and energy for prayer. Having been pathologically busy for too many years, I have taken great comfort in Wendell Berry’s observation that “work done gratefully and well is prayer.” It doesn’t substitute for kneeling or sitting quietly and setting aside all other occupations. But it is what most of us can manage most of the

time. Little injunctions along the way—“This is your work, Lord, guide me in doing it” or “Breathe in me, breath of God”; “Open my eyes as I walk through this day to see where your Spirit leads” or “God be in my ears and in my listening”—can reframe the most commonplace task and renew a sense of adventure and expectancy.

Public prayer is as needful for our spiritual health as private prayer. The purpose of the liturgy is to gather us and teach us how to be one in Christ. As we read the printed prayers aloud, even if one part of the mind wanders to matters of room temperature or buzzing flies, we align ourselves with the communion of saints and are lifted into a great wave of shared life. Perhaps, if we are attentive, we come to an awareness that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin articulated when he said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

The scattered, shattered body of Christ, shifting and rumbling in the many corners of this world, will not be united by means of conferences, declarations, exhortations or negotiations, though we must engage in those things to work out our salvation. Only in prayer and in the sharing of the Lord’s Supper, which reminds us more vividly than anything else that we hold our very bodies in common and live in deep dependence on God and each other, can unity be broached.

Public prayer matters differently—and urgently—outside those sites of worship where it is acknowledged to be essential business. There still remain places and occasions when a designated person of faith is called upon to offer an invocation, a benediction, grace before a meal, a prayer of dedication for a new building or a blessing for a bike race. Curiously, such requests often come from people who retain little more than a vestigial sense of prayer as a ritual act that dignifies the occasion. But there is opportunity in public prayer to practice radical authenticity. To be asked to pray publicly is to be handed a flaming torch, not just a lapel microphone. Imagine offering in public the prayers the public most needs. Imagine being specific, both about our corporate sins and about the love that is “broader than the measures of the mind.” A pastor I know begins many public prayers with simple statements of reaffirmation: “Gracious God, you are the One who loves us beyond what we can imagine” or “God, you are the One who forgives when no one else will” or “Loving God, from whom we receive all that we have.”

We need those reminders to revise and reframe our assumptions about how to live. Georgia Harkness’s *Prayer and the Common Life*, written over half a century ago,

begins with a bold statement about the relevance of prayer to the urgencies of the historical moment: “Of all the things the world now desperately needs,” she writes, “none is more needed than an upsurge of vital, God-centered, intelligently grounded prayer.” She insists on an essentially theological view of the world as the only appropriate starting point for effective radical politics—the only way to maintain a right understanding of what we are about and to avoid partisanship in our efforts to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

The commitment to linking prayer with action comes with a cost: congregations struggle and split over activism. But those who stay through the tensions learn to accept uncertainties and conflicts as an incentive to deepen their questions. There need to be those who preach prophetically, speak boldly and act decisively. There need also to be those who conserve, bide their time and practice prudence. We need the Wal-Mart worker who depends on her job despite its poor benefits as well as the leader of the local movement to boycott the megachain for its labor abuses.

A comment that stays with me from many years ago, when I first encountered contemplative prayer on a visit to a Carmelite monastery, is a friend’s observation that none of us can know how much of what God is doing in the world is brought about in response to the prayers of people we don’t know and never see. Every day millions of faithful souls in monasteries and back pews and small apartments exercise the priesthood of all believers in prayer practices that bring life to the church as the beating heart brings blood to the body. Some spend their time in *lectio divina*, listening for the word or phrase in scripture that addresses the moment, finding in each word and image a trailhead, a trigger point, an invitation. Cynthia Bourgeault, in *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, writes of *lectio* that it “offers a simple but comprehensive practice of praying the scripture that leads gradually but steadily from the mind to the heart. . . . One takes the word of God deeper and deeper into oneself until finally it returns to the silence which is, as John of the Cross intimated, ‘God’s first language,’ out of which both Word and words emerge.”

That emergence takes an unpredictable course. Every worthwhile reflection on prayer comes back to these mysteries: that it works, but not to purposes we can predict or prescribe; that it can take place in the merest breath, the slightest turning, and below the level of awareness; that it is also a matter worthy of a lifetime of learning and experimentation; that it brings us into intimate encounter with the God who is Love; that it binds us together and teaches us how to be the

body of Christ; that it also leads those from outside Christian tradition into divine encounter in ways we may learn from; and that it may be the least among us whose prayers open the windows through which the Spirit blows.

Nicholaes Maes's painting *Old Woman at Prayer* has hung on my wall for years as a reminder of the many who, hidden and unrecognized, summon God's power into the world through words faithfully uttered over the most daily concerns. She sits before a solitary meal, eyes closed and head inclined before a bowl of soup and a few loaves. An impatient cat pulls at the tablecloth, but she, apparently, will not be distracted. As George Eliot reminds us in the final lines of Middlemarch, we have no way of knowing what we owe "to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." We can, however, rest assured that no prayer is lost and that when we pray we are drawn into a vortex of power that is utterly unpredictable and the most secure place on earth.