

"Shall we have a prayer?"

By [Diane Roth](#)

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It was a hard time. I was not sure of a direction, and felt like my movement was blocked at every turn. I felt like I had made many mistakes, and was not sure yet if they were fatal mistakes. I wasn't sure if my gifts were valued, or even if my gifts were worth valuing.

It was a hard time. I poured out my heart to a colleague. I choked back tears. He affirmed my doubts, but I felt his words of assurance were weak. He couldn't tell me it would be all right. Of course he couldn't.

After an awkward silence, when we both sense that the conversation was dangling, but over, for now, he ventured, "Shall we have a prayer?"

I was surprised by the vehemence of my response.

"No," I said, or, more accurately, choked it out.

No.

The thing is, I am all for prayer. I usually suspect that we do not pray enough, rather than too much. I think it would help a lot if we all (and not just pastors) got better at prayer, not necessarily more eloquent, just better. I believe that prayer is powerful, more powerful than we know, that it can cause explosions, and that, even when it salves, perhaps it stings. I am all for prayer.

So, I'm not exactly sure what it was. It had something to do with my tears, I think, my own inability to speak. For some reason I didn't want someone else putting words in my mouth, and perhaps saying a different prayer than I would say. My own prayer was a lament, the Spirit's sighs too deep for words.

Perhaps I sensed that the prayer was an attempt to tie up the awkward loose ends in the conversation, to tie up the loose ends in my life then. I knew I didn't want to

hear some pious words about how everything would work out.

I am thinking about the fact that I said, "No," and what that might mean. I pray for people fairly often. I think that prayer is an act of courage, actually. It takes a fair amount of courage to ask the question, "Shall we have a prayer?" It takes courage to pray for someone, to pray with someone, to believe we can. It takes courage, a combination of boldness and humility and listening. A good prayer is weeping, and a good prayer can raise the dead.

But there are times, I think, we we want to pray to cover up our own fear, because there is an awkward silence and we don't know what to say. And there are times our prayer of assurance might silence someone else's lament, because we don't want to hear it. So how do we know which is which?

The one who prays tells the truth, the hard truth, the truth with frayed edges, the Truth that sometimes comes with sighs and silence.

"Jesus wept."

"Lazarus, come out!"

"Shall we have a prayer?"

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