

MY LIFE IN PRAYER
Copyright: Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: I Thessalonians 5: 16-18 (NRSV)

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

“What is Contemplation?” Thomas Merton

“Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith. For contemplation is a kind of spiritual vision to which both reason and faith aspire, by their very nature, because without it they must always remain incomplete.”¹

I have offered to you my testimony that I do not worship a theistic God, if by that term one means a God who exists outside of this world, who is removed from the creation, sits on a throne from which such a God may intervene in history from time to time. That is to say, I do not worship a supernatural God. I have said on multiple occasions that this is a believe that is mine and has evolved with the growth and evolution of my soul. If you are a Congregationalist you understand that every statement of belief that I share is not binding on any congregant. Each of you is responsible for his or her own faith stance. At the same time I would be a weak rhetorician if I did not speak persuasively or with conviction.

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003), 1.

I am also well aware that a sermon should be about about the length of a woman's skirt. Long enough to cover the subject, short enough to keep it interesting! Otherwise, the preacher faces the challenge of the minister who was notorious for long and deadly boring sermons. One Sunday he announced to the congregation that this would be his last Sunday as Jesus had called him to another pulpit. Immediately the congregation jumped up and sang, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." So let us move on to the subject at hand.

Let me say very quickly that this sermon is not about the rudiments of prayer, or prayer formulas, the use of scripture in prayer, or about silent meditation. I am speaking this morning of the deep existential movement of the Spirit of life in my daily round. These shape, guide, and inform my prayer life, but today I want to focus on its deeper meaning.

I have said to you that I experience God in creativity, the continuous generative movement of material and spirit. I know God as the flow of light and energy, the sustaining Source of my being that moves us through the endless spiral of birth and death. I have said to you that I experience God in humanity. I have never experienced God's grace in a vacuum, but always in the full force of human beings who extend compassion, forgiveness, mercy, patience, and laughter. I firmly believe in the incarnation of God, not isolated to the Jesus experience, but replicated in millions of women and men who bake bread and welcome others to their table. I have said to you that I experience God in wisdom. Wisdom is the

flow of discernment within communities of faith calling us into right relationships with one another.

You can imagine therefore that my life in prayer is not the typical petitionary prayer. Prayers of petition are the norm for many faithful people. These are the prayers that seek gifts from God, or intervention from God, often of an extraordinary nature. These prayers are often intertwined with promises to God of better behavior or full time Christian ministry.

I am reminded of the eight year old Catholic boy who was anxiously waiting for his birthday. He had fervently prayed for a bicycle for the past two years but had not received one. The night before his party he was on his knees offering his nightly prayer. He began like this, "Dear God, this is Johnny. If you will get me a bicycle for my birthday I promise to be a good boy and not hurt my sister ever again." He climbed into bed and thought about that for a moment. Jumping out of bed he fell to his knees and said, "And God, if I get a bicycle for my birthday I promise to go to mass every Sunday. I might even become a priest. And you know there is a shortage of priests these days. Amen."

Johnny thought about his prayer as he snuggled under his blankets. He was not convinced he had been persuasive. He got out of bed and ran down stairs. There on the family altar was a statue of Jesus. Johnny took the statue up to his bedroom. He wrapped Jesus in a heavy towel and stuck it in the bottom of his

deepest drawer. On his knees again Johnny prayed, “Dear God, if you ever want to see your son again you will get me that bicycle!”

My life in prayer cannot be described as petitionary. My life in prayer is one of awareness and gratitude. This question was pressed upon me by my dear friend, Dr. Kay Northcutt. Kay is one a several dozen people who receive my sermons by email. I always try to ad a personal note to share with my friends and family how we are doing in Kansas and special events in our life here. In May I mentioned that we had slaughtered the last of our spring fryers. Kay wanted to know what the process was like and had it changed my perspective at all. Because my life in prayer is not an abstract one and because it is deeply personal and experiential, I want to share my response to Kay as a way to pointing to the major themes of awareness and gratitude. My spirituality is deeply and irrevocably anchored in my life experiences. All that I experience in life is experienced in the presence of the Sacred. This response is expanded quite a bit and edited from my hurried email to her.

The slaughter of any animal is really dirty work. With hens we are talking about dirt, dung, blood, and feathers. I try very hard to make the process run as smooth as possible and with as little trauma to the animals as possible. We have learned how to make the process streamlined but that does not mean that everything goes to plan.

We begin the night before by withholding food from the birds. In the morning I sharpen the tommy axe and butcher knives. Large pots of water are put on the stove to boil and a fire is started in the burn barrel outside. The butcher table is soaped, rinsed, and disinfected. Mimi sets out a few lawn chairs for the pluckers and a large tub of cold water. I tie slip-knots in five or six pieces of bailing twine, about four feet in length. These I stuff in my back pocket with the knotted ends hanging out. When everything is ready I head to the hen house.

I grab the hen by its feet, holding it upside down. Holding the bird upside down settles the bird with the rush of blood to the head. The slip knot is secured around its feet. I place the hen on the butcher block, its head between two three inch bolts that are about two inches apart. With slight pressure I pull the body back, giving me full exposure to the neck. I use the hatchet to cut the head off, which falls into a bucket. I am still holding the neck firmly to prevent blood from spraying everywhere. Of course its nervous system is in full gear and wants to flop around. I hold it firmly under my left arm and tie it to the fence. It will hang there for several minutes to drain out the blood. I move on to the next hen.

Mimi, Wes, and sometimes our neighbor, Nancy, will take the hen and dip it in scalding water, usually for less than a minute. You have to be careful not to cook the chicken at the point. Scalding makes the feathers come off rather easily. In some ways this is the most messy part. When the hen is plucked they bring it back to me to gut it. You have to be careful not to rupture the bile, which is located

near the liver. If it ruptures the whole bird has to be disposed. After the bird is gutted it is put in the large tub of cold water. Feathers, heads, feet and guts are thrown into the burn barrel.

When we have processed all of the hens we take them into the kitchen where we finish dressing them. This involves not only the cutting up of the birds for freezing, with the endless process of picking out more feathers. Once you have done this a couple of times you will never sit down to eat chicken and not find more feathers or hair to pluck. From the time we put the water on to boil to the last hen vacuum sealed for the freezer, the whole process takes about four hours for a dozen hens. I am sure there are older and more experienced hands that can do it faster.

As you know, we also raise our own eggs. I had originally planned to raise meat goats but Mimi named the three we have so that project was discontinued. I also wanted to raise meat rabbits but there was strong objection in our house to the death of Thumper. We are raising our own vegetables and have planted fruit trees. Whenever possible we buy local meats and vegetables. We buy pork from a man who lives down the road. We buy beef and bison that is locally grass fed in Yoder or Gossel. We buy local fruits and vegetables from the farmer's market in Newton and Wichita. We have met a woman who grinds organic red wheat and we purchase our flour from her.

Does the food taste much different? Anyone can tell the difference between a home grown tomato and an irradiated store bought one. Our eggs have a deeper orange yolk, though I am not sure I can taste much difference. Mimi's sister and others who buy eggs from Emily claim a much better taste in our eggs. Our layers are fed organic feed, cracked corn, and are free of antibiotics and other chemicals.

On a deeper level such a lifestyle brings us much closer to our sense of the land and the people who work the land. We are much more aware of the symbiotic nature of life and the fact that in one way or another all living involves suffering. Even those who are vegetarians eating organic plants contribute to the disruption and suffering of animal life. It may be the insects and molecular life that is destroyed every time we step onto soil, or the death of worms, snakes, and birds that have made their homes in the soil and flora of a garden. I do not mean to disparage vegetarianism, but to note that all of life is about sacrifice and no one can presume to eat a blessed thing on this earth that does not require vital relinquishment. This is a sacred truth about the delicate interdependence of our lives with the plant and animal kingdom. We cannot escape the truth because we buy food that is prepackaged. This, I believe, is the heart of that splendid table grace: "God is great. God is good. Let us thank God for our food. By God's hands we all are fed. Thank you, God, for daily bread."

I would also say that our lives have a deeper sense of wonder, and at the same time a broad sense of life's fragility. As you know we have raised several

goats from birth only to lose them after several weeks or months. We planted nearly two acres in natural grasses about three weeks ago for pasture. We now worry that the seeds were washed out in torrential rainfall. But that is nothing compared to the wheat, corn, and soy crops that have been lost in the last few weeks in Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and other states to flood, wind, hail and tornado. We watch daily the struggle of animals who are well fed every single day and yet remain insecure about their next meal. They push and shove to get to the feed trough as if we had neglected to feed that very same morning. We work with horses and are reminded at every encounter that their first instinct is fear.

And need I remind us of those whose lives are dedicated to the cultivation of the soil and animal husbandry. Agriculture remains one of the most dangerous occupations that maim or kill people every year. These are the men and women whose sweat and blood put food on our table, living and working in the garden of life. They fill the bread baskets of humanity. It is no wonder that African farmers pray, "The bread is warm and fresh; the water cool and clear. Lord of all life, be with us. Lord of all life, be near."

We try to be as close to these people and as close to the land as we can be because this is where the Source of life is most essential - most elemental - most fundamental. My prayer life is waking up and paying attention to the natural and human processes that sustain life. It is not unlike the Chinese grace, "Each time we eat we remember God's love." My life in prayer is the constant opening of my

soul to the realities, the beauty and the blood, that make for life. My prayer life is one of gratitude for seeds and soil, rain and labor, harvest and preparation. My prayer life is one of thanksgiving for this complex exchange of material and soul for the sustenance of all living things. In the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

He prayeth best,
who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God
Who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

That same openness and gratitude flows into all of the relationships that give me health, educate my mind, protect and secure me and my family, build our home, and mend my soul. My life in prayer means to wake up and pay attention to the myriad ways that grace touches and sustains us all. And with every moment of such enlightenment I can only respond with “Thank you.” Meister Eckhart stated it so clearly when he wrote, “If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, “thank you,” that would suffice.” I think this is what Paul means in his letter to the Thessalonians. He encourages us all to pray with out ceasing - be aware of the flow of grace that rushes everywhere. Rejoice and give thanks in all of life’s circumstances, even the hoeing of weeds, the butchering of chickens, the preparation of a meal, and the gentle flow of wine and bread.

I hope that what I have offered here this morning is an honest reflection of the contemplative life that Thomas Merton described. It is not a life of prayer that

is removed and isolated, alone and individualistic. But rather, it is a life that is “fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive.” With each moment that I am aware and awake to this wonderful life I am touched by that infinitely abundant Source that some call God. While I experience the particular I am introduced to the universal. While I experience the immediate I proceed to the transcendent. I close with this poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

“For flowers that bloom about our feet,
 Father we thank Thee.
 For tender grass so fresh and sweet,
 Father we thank Thee.
 For the song of bird and hum of bee,
 For all this fair we hear or see,
 Father in heaven we thank Thee.

For blue of stream and blue of sky,
 Father we thank Thee.
 For pleasant shade of branches high,
 Father we thank Thee.
 For fragrant air and cooling breeze,
 For beauty of the blooming trees,
 Father in heaven we thank Thee.

For this new morning with its light,
 Father we thank Thee.
 For rest and shelter of the night,
 Father we thank Thee.
 for health and food for love and friends,
 For everything thy goodness sends,
 Father in heaven, we thank Thee.”

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