

Ancient Christian Practices: Prayer

Colossians 1:1-14

This is the second in a series of Sunday sermons during the season of Lent in which I am focusing on Ancient Christian Practices for Today. Each Wednesday at Rejoice Night we take some time to practice and to share our experience of the Sunday topic. I hope you'll come on Wednesday. This particular Rejoice Night we'll take a look at praying for the world – for the experience of being in a world that is in crisis from earthquakes to war to political upheaval. How can you take it all in? How do you ask God to be with you in the world? What is your place in the healing of the world?

But that's Wednesday night. This morning I want to do something a little different. I want to look at prayer from God's point of view. So instead of talking about the mechanics of prayer or the many kinds of prayer or our purposes in prayer, I invite you to imagine with me what God seeks in our prayer. Perhaps we worry too much about getting it right, when all God wants is to get the conversation rolling! As Paul says this morning in the reading from Colossians, God has a purpose in our prayer: *As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work. We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul – not the grim strength of gritting your teeth, but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful God has for us.*

And as we go, let's sing. I'll stop a few times along the way as I ask what God's up to in our prayer. Let's keep it simple and sing a line from Kum Ba Yah: *Someone's praying, my Lord, Kum Ba Yah, someone's praying, my Lord, Kum Ba Ya.*

Remember that Kum Ba Yah means, Come by here. So when we pray or sing, we are asking God to “come by here” to be what God is and do what God does.

First of all, God simply wants to hear from us. God has a preference, you might say, for not being forgotten, ignored or overlooked! It’s not that God is vain or needy or self-absorbed, but that God has a life for us to live and that life is far more interesting and joyful than anything we expect, so God is simply waiting for us to ask. My partner Susan sent me a morning prayer the other day from a writer named Marianne Williamson, and it really moves me. Suppose our day began this way, with asking?

Dear God,

I give you this morning. Please take away my despair of yesterday.

Help me to forgive the things that caused me pain and would keep me bound.

Help me to begin again.

Please bless my path and illumine my mind.

I surrender to You the day ahead.

Please bless every person and situation I will encounter.

Make me who You would have me be, that I might do as You would have me do.

Please enter my heart and remove all anger, fear and pain.

Renew my soul and free my spirit.

Thank you, God, for this day.

Amen.

Well, what do you think? Is such a day worth asking for?

Let’s sing: ***Someone’s praying, my Lord, kum ba yah.....***

Here’s the second thing. Pay attention to the life you have! This, too, is a form of prayer! Within your own life are all the clues you need to the mysteries of good and evil, desire and despair, and grit and beauty. To pay attention is to honor how God has made you. To pay attention is to discover your own gifts. To pay

attention is to give praise to God. There are, some have said, more than one kind of scripture. There is the scripture of the book, of the tradition, of the words. And then there is the scripture of the world, and of the body, and of God's loving presence in it.

Poet Mary Oliver asks what each of us would do with our "one wild and precious life". She says:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

Into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

How to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

Which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

With your one wild and precious life?

Someone's praying, my Lord, kum ba yah.

Third, from God's point of view, you don't have to be a hero. You don't have to save the world on your own. You can, however, *do tiny and everyday things with grace and courage and hope*. And God will add to them. Sometimes, I think, we forget, that even Jesus came doing tiny things. We imagine, I think, that Jesus had many years and a cast of thousands and armies of faithful disciples behind

him. He didn't. There were less than three years of his ministry, in a minor province of a vast empire, with a dozen or so committed disciples. Yet what has come of his life? And so let your life become a prayer, where tiny things are given a purpose that only God can see!

During the Second World War, in the last months as bombers took off from England to fly over Germany, many planes and many crew were lost. It was dangerous work. There's a story about one bomber crew that finished their night's work and headed back to England. They got separated from their fighter protection. The crew saw a German plane come blazing out of the sky with all guns firing, tracer bullets spitting at them. Then they heard *thud, thud, thud, thud, thud*. Five bullets slammed into the bomber's fuselage near the gas tank. Fire was the great fear – and explosion – and oblivion. But even though the crew could see gas spilling from the tank, there was no explosion. Slowly, heavily, carefully, and they flew back to their base in England.

The next morning a mechanic found the crew and showed them five bullets he had found inside the gas tank – all crumpled but not exploded. The mechanic handed them to the pilot. The pilot carefully opened the shells and to his amazement found that they were empty of powder, but each had a tiny wad of paper. When he unfolded the paper, he found notes that said: *We are Polish POW's – forced to make bullets in factory. When guards do not look, we do not fill with powder. Is not much, but best we can do.* And the notes were signed by four Polish POW's with their names and a request: *Pray for us.*

Never forget that your life is a prayer. When you do anything just because it is worth doing and not because you'll ever know what good you do, you offer yourself as a prayer! And God will do the rest.

Somebody's praying, my Lord, kum ba yah....

Fourth, and finally for today, God would have us know that the anxiety and contradiction and suffering of the world are not final. There is a Spirit even here in our world always steadfast and powerful amidst the things that destroy. There is a destiny for all that lies beyond the reach of evil. God is not finished with us!

Therefore, we can ask – as Paul says today – *for the strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful he has for us.*

We can ask! And we will begin to see as God sees – with love, with compassion, with laughter, with tears, with trust! When we begin to see as God does, we will pray all the more *until we and our prayer and God are one.*

So, I invite you to pray this prayer every time the world feels large and you feel small: *Lord, give me the heart you would have me have. Lord, give me the heart you would have me have. Lord, give me the heart you would have me have.*

It is said that when you sing, you pray twice:

Someone's singing, my Lord, kum ba yah. Someone's singing, my Lord....

Amen