
Sermon
Days of Prayer

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
May 16, 2010

First Reading: *Matthew 6:5-15 – Scholar’s Version*

And when you pray, don’t act like phonies. They love to stand up and pray in houses of worship and on street corners, so they can show off in public. I swear to you, their prayers have been answered! When you pray, go into a room by yourself and shut the door behind you. Then pray to your Father, the hidden one. And your father, with his eye for the hidden, will applaud you. And when you pray, you should not babble on as the pagans do. They imagine that the length of their prayers will command attention. So don’t imitate them. After all, your Father knows what you need before you ask. Instead, you should pray like this:

Our Father in the heavens,
Your name be revered.
Impose your imperial rule,
Enact your will on earth as you have in heaven.
Provide us with the bread we need for the day.
Forgive our debts
To the extent that we have forgiven those in debt to us.
And please don’t subject us to test after test,
But rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their failures and offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive yours. And if you don’t forgive the failures and mistakes of others, your Father won’t forgive yours.

Second Reading: A. Powell Davies. *The Language of the Heart.*

[Prayer] . . . is the language of the heart, akin to poetry. Its concern is not with exact description, as that of prose so often is, but with reality itself and with the power to evoke our spiritual resources. Prayer goes on where other language leaves off: It has to do with what is least known and yet most deeply felt. The truth it touches is too great for logical precision and is corroborated not by argument but in experience. Nevertheless, prayer of all things should never be careless. It should carry integrity to its highest intensity.

Everyone prays, although not everyone admits it. Even a curse is a kind of prayer — a prayer inverted. Under the strain of difficult conditions, or in severe loss or bereavement, or when emotionally moved by a scene of great beauty — as at many other times when we are deeply stirred — there is something within us that cries out for expression. Though we cannot understand the mystery of the world about us, we feel its kinship with the mystery within us. This mystery, too, we do not understand but we know it in our own aliveness. Something there is that will not allow it to be silent; it speaks out in our own voices.

Sermon

May 6, 2010 – a week ago Thursday – was the National Day of Prayer. It is an observance that began in 1952 when Congress passed a bill calling on the President to set aside a national day of prayer. Truman signed it into law. The bill was in response to a challenge by The Rev. Billy Graham, speaking on the Capitol steps, to have a national day of prayer. He said, in part,

Ladies and gentlemen, our Nation was founded upon God, religion and the church

. . .

What a thrilling, glorious thing it would be to see the leaders of our country today kneeling before Almighty God in prayer. What a thrill would sweep this country. What renewed hope and courage would grip the Americans at this hour of peril.

. . .

We have dropped our pilot, the Lord Jesus Christ, and are sailing blindly on without divine chart or compass, hoping somehow to find our desired haven. We have certain leaders who are rank materialists; they do not recognize God nor care for Him; they spend their time in one round of parties after another. The Capital City of our Nation can have a great spiritual awakening, thousands coming to Jesus Christ, but certain leaders have not lifted an eyebrow, nor raised a finger, nor showed the slightest bit of concern. Ladies and gentlemen, I warn you, if this state of affairs continues, the end of the course is national shipwreck and ruin.

Observance of the National Day of Prayer began slowly. In the late seventies and early eighties it became more important. It was coupled with Prayer Breakfasts for our national leaders. Today there is a National Day of Prayer Task Force with the website NationalDayofPrayer.org. You might want to look it up. I did. Within seconds I knew why a U.S. District Court in Wisconsin issued an order last month declaring the enabling statute for the National Day of Prayer to be unconstitutional. Its promoters insist it is just a vague general acknowledgment of religion. It is not. It's history is explicit. It was intended to be a day to "bring thousands to Christ." The website of the National Day of Prayer Task Force is also explicit. Its stated vision includes:

Fostering unity within the Christian Church and Publicizing and preserving America's Christian heritage.

That and other language on its website leave no doubt that the National Day of Prayer is intended to explicitly and to aggressively promote not just Christianity, but what is commonly called conservative Evangelical Christianity. That is also consistent with Billy Graham's original call for its creation, a call that – in context – was explicit advocacy for what can best be described as Christian Nationalism as a response to the fear in the early 1950's of nuclear annihilation by Godless Communists. Rev. Graham stopped just short of calling for a full blown Christian theocracy – one which I suspect would have, in practice, had a sufficiently narrow understanding of what it means to be a Christian that the majority of self-professed Christians would have been excluded.

But what I find most interesting about the National Day of Prayer is not its constitutional shortcomings, but how its practice is, if you take the Bible seriously, completely at odds with Christianity. You may recall that Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham, was scheduled to take part in a National Day of Prayer service at the Pentagon. That invitation was rescinded when Pentagon officials became aware of his anti-Muslim comments that made his appearance inappropriate given the number of Muslims serving in America's Armed Forces. His response was, as his father's before him, to appear on a street corner where he invited the press to observe him showing off in public with his public prayers. Now let me think. Isn't there something in the Bible about that? Oh, yes, I remember now:

And when you pray, don't act like phonies. They love to stand up and pray in houses of worship and on street corners, so they can show off in public. I swear to you, their prayers have been answered! When you pray, go into a room by yourself and shut the door behind you. Then pray to your Father, the hidden one. And your father, with his eye for the hidden, will applaud you. And when you pray, you should not babble on as the pagans do. They imagine that the length of their prayers will command attention. So don't imitate them. After all, your Father knows what you need before you ask.

And who said that? That's right: Jesus. When it comes to prayer, I'm on the side of Jesus. And I want to make something clear to all of you. I've come to believe in the power of prayer. I believe in the power of prayer because I no longer believe prayer is what Billy and Franklin Graham claim it is. Their sort of prayer reminds me of something Shel Silverstein wrote called the prayer of the selfish little boy.

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my toys to break,
So none of the other kids can use 'em....
Amen.

I believe all of us pray. We don't always know we're praying, but from time to time I believe all of us pray. It doesn't matter whether you are a theist, deist, agnostic or atheist, we all pray. It doesn't matter whether you are a Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or none of the above, I believe we all pray. We pray whenever we look inside our hearts and give voice to our most deeply held concerns. In my opinion the where and how of prayer can differ dramatically, but when we give voice to the still small voice within we are praying. And when you listen to how people pray you will learn much about them. They may reveal themselves as self-centered and narcissistic; or they may reveal themselves as loving and charitable and concerned for others. I have had people say they are praying for me and been deeply offended – because I perceived their prayers as self-centered expressions of the desire to control and manipulate. I have had other people say they are praying for me, using the exact same words, and been deeply moved – because I heard in their words genuine love and concern.

The purpose of prayer is not to describe the world, but to describe our feelings and in the process – sometimes unwittingly – reveal something of ourselves. I believe A. Powell Davies offered the best description, the best definition of prayer when he said that it is the language of the heart. As such prayer may be the tears of grief you shed when a loved one dies or tears of joy at the sight of your new born child. A prayer may be an angry shout against injustice or, as Davies said, even a curse. Or it could be something more akin to Shel Silverstein's Prayer of the Greedy Little Boy. I believe the deepest, most genuine forms of prayer are in response to what A. Powell Davies described in these words.

Though we cannot understand the mystery of the world about us, we feel its kinship with the mystery within us. This mystery, too, we do not understand but we know it in our own aliveness. Something there is that will not allow it to be silent; it speaks out in our own voices.

His words seem to me to be in harmony with the words of that Palestinian peasant who complained so loudly about street corner preaching. I hear not harmony, but discord and pretense in those who claim our world will end unless governments issue decrees for public prayer and then stage spectacles that can be covered by the press. That is because I believe there is more of politics than piety about prayer as public theater. That is why I believe opposition to the National Day of Prayer is called for not only on constitutional grounds, but also – and more importantly – on religious grounds. Governments have never been the friend of religion unless religion has been willing to be the lapdog of government and to promote and endorse whatever the government says. I believe that has been true throughout human history. When I listen to the defenders of the National Day of Prayer I do not hear religion. I perceive their words as political speech with political ends, the pursuit of power for the sake of personal privilege.

But if it is about religion, consider this. Since its inception the National Day of Prayer, in the words of its original proponent and its ongoing supporters, has existed for the express purpose of promoting and establishing Christianity. By itself that is sufficient to overturn the practice of government endorsement. And that endorsement is ironic because the immediate and proximate cause for which Jesus, the central figure of Christianity, was executed was his public demonstration against the cozy relationship that existed between the leaders of the Jewish Temple Priesthood and the Roman Empire, a demonstration that was seen as insurrection against Rome. His protest was based on the then widespread belief amongst the Jewish people that the Temple Priesthood were Quislings who had sold out the Jewish religion for political privilege and power. The language of the defenders of the National Day of Prayer is remarkably similar to the language attributed to the Sadducees. The Reverends Billy and Franklin Graham seem strangely unaware of the roles they are playing in this drama – or perhaps they are just unconcerned.

George Bernard Shaw once said,

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish

selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

All too often public prayer, the prayer that takes place on street corners with advance notice for the press to cover it, is in the form of demands that the world make us happy. I prefer the prayers that show a commitment to something larger than the self because I think that is what religion is about – the pursuit of meaning beyond the self. It is why I find prayer in the form of works more satisfying. It is why I have always been partial to the words of the Letter from James that says,

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17 NRSV)

American Unitarianism has moved a long way from its beginnings in the Eighteenth century as a Christian reform movement. But at the heart of that movement was an idea that still survives and – in my opinion – stands at the heart of Unitarianism today. It is the idea that salvation – whatever that may mean – is built upon character. It is built not on the words that come out of our mouths, but on the deeds of our lives. That will always be more important than press releases or prayers on street corners. It will always be more important than government pronouncements calling people to prayer or arguing about such prayers because no prayer speaks louder than the deeds of our lives.

I believe we all pray. All of us. Theists, deists, agnostics and atheists, we all pray. We may not know it, but we do. The only question is whether it will be the Prayer of the Selfish Little Boy complaining that the world has not made us happy or the prayer of a George Bernard Shaw that we be used for a mighty purpose.

Amen.