

Prayer

Rev. John Allen

[STORY OF CORA SAYING GRACE]

Our two year old daughter...

A few days ago she announced...

She started confidently enough...

Dear God... Amen!

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Now of course it is not uncommon for toddlers to launch into something without much of a plan. And this was no different. She knew it was time to pray. And she knew she was going to do it.

Even if she didn't have a clue what she was going to put into this prayer that she so enthusiastically volunteered for.

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The poet Mary Oliver says it this way in her poem "Praying":

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which

another voice may speak.”

Our prayers do not have to be works of art to reach the ears of the almighty. They do not even have to arise out of our certainty to echo in God’s heart.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, when he taught us the words of the Lord’s Prayer that we continue to pray each week in worship, he did not give us a sonnet, but a simple set of words, that could contain almost the whole of our hearts.

God, bring your dreamed-for world to life.

Give us what we need today.

Forgive us. Help us forgive others.

And keep us out of trouble.

Because power and glory are not ours. But yours. Always.

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Jesus was well known for pointing to children as exemplars of faithful living.

And what Cora reminded me at the dinner table that night is that the act of praying can come before the words of a prayer.

So if find yourself in a moment, perhaps even know, when your practice of prayer has been worn dull by unrelenting anxiety.

If you feel like you would need years to compose the kind of poetic prayer that would be adequate to face down the sin of white supremacy, or that would turn back a pandemic.

If you are too busy for a quiet moment to fold your hands.

Or so tired that when you close your eyes, you just end up falling right asleep.

You can still pray.

Prayer is not a heap of fancy words. As Mary Oliver says, it is a doorway.

Or sometimes, it is just the tiniest crack in the wall, or a curtain lifted up just enough for a bit of light to sneak through.

Prayer is the habit by which we notice God in our lives and in the world. It is making space to let creation feel enchanted, to let the wells of hope refill, to remember the most simple-seeming things, that are actually unimaginable gifts. It is about truly absorbing the image of divinity imprinted on humanity.

All it takes is to stop. And notice. To let all of that... into all of this.

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Throughout my ministry I have had many occasions to visit people with severe memory loss, alzheimers, dementia...

I often sit with folks who struggle to remember who I even am, or why I am there.

I always end my visits with prayer, and with those who have memory loss, I always use the Lord's Prayer. Because without fail, even people who have been otherwise unable to form a sentence that I can understand, will join their suddenly-study voices with mine in those familiar words.

That prayer is written so indelibly on their heart, that not even the cruelest of diseases can rob them of the capacity to pray.

Its not a contest. It doesn't need to be fancy. Its an opening.

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I can't promise you that any one prayer is going to magically change anything.

But I can promise you that your life will be transformed in surprising ways if you get in the habit of opening that door, at least a crack, each day to see what is waiting there for you.

And I expect that the world might start to transform too if a lot of us were letting a little of that light in.

So you should pray.

But don't worry, if you want, you can use these familiar words that we have been using since this started. They are very reliable.

Or, you could just launch into a prayer with no plan at all. See where it takes you.

Even if all you end us with is. Dear God... Amen!