

Prayer With Eyes Wide Open

From the series: Spritual Life – Religion Re-Imagined

Text: Psalm 130, Mark 1:29-39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Reading From the Present comes from Thomas Moore's recent book, *The Soul's Religion*. It is actually a quote that he gives us from a poet, Wallace Stevens. I liked it because I thought it had something to say about the breadth of experience of the spiritual life about which we have been thinking together. Wallace Stevens writes this in his Journal, 1902:

Last night I spent an hour in the dark transept of St. Patrick's Cathedral where I go now and then in my more lonely moods. An old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the Church, but the world itself. The mysterious callings of nature and our responses. What incessant murmurs fill that ever laboring, tireless church. But, today in my walk, I thought that, after all, there's no conflict of format, but rather a contrast. In the cathedral I felt one presence, on the highway I felt another. Two different deities present themselves, and though I have only a cloudy vision of either, yet I now feel the distinction between them. The priest in me worships one God at one shrine; the poet another God at another shrine. The priest worshiped mercy and love, the poet beauty and might. In the shadows of the church, I could hear the prayers of men and women. In the shadows of the trees, nothing mingled with divinity. As I sat dreaming with the congregation, I felt how the glittering altar works on my senses, stimulating and consoling them, and as I went tramping through the fields and woods, I beheld every leaf and blade of grass revealing or rather betokening the invisible.

Sometimes the things that we talk about here together stimulate other thoughts, and we have been talking about religion and spirituality these weeks—how religion is the structure through which our spiritual lives express themselves, whether for good or for ill. Someone gave me a quote from the AA community. It goes like this: "Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for people who have been there." As is often true, AA has a lot of wisdom. But our religious life does, in many ways, determine the nature or the degree to which our

spiritual life is really in tune and in touch with where we are and where we are living.

This morning we consider “Praying With Eyes Wide Open.” Prayer is certainly the center of our religious experience. Prayer is the heart and center of our spiritual life. To pray is to be human, to be religious, to be spiritual. Without prayer, there is a barrenness that certainly bespeaks a sickness of soul. Prayer comes in many forms and takes many shapes, probably as many as there are those of us who pray.

Following the cue of Thomas Moore, who did some autobiographical writing in his book, I have shared with you some of my own autobiographical experience, and when I think about prayer, I think of my own story. I have had such a difficult time with prayer. I have been a terrible model of prayer. I have never successfully had a devotional life, and I confess that before you, my people. That is not the fault of my childhood, because my childhood was saturated in prayer. Three meals a day began and concluded with prayer. The day did not end without the offering of a prayer. In my youth, I was involved in all kinds of prayer groups. If I had been young these days, I would have been one of those kids gathered around the flagpole on the schoolyard. Because of my ambiguous feelings about that whole thing, I realize that I must keep in check any criticism. If someone like me could fall as far as I have from that, then there is hope for those gathering, too.

In my college years there was more prayer and prayer groups. In seminary I worked with a pastor who was marked by his prayer life and everyone knew it. If you mentioned his name, everyone knew he was a man of prayer. Under his tutelage, I developed my own devotional style in the morning. It centered around a little loose-leaf notebook, page after page of names and causes and concerns, and every morning, I mean every morning, I rose early and on my knees paged through that book. I continued that practice when I came here in 1960 for a little while. But eventually it faded.

I suppose it faded because I hated every minute of it. It was not me. For me, it was not natural. It was not the air I breathed. I am not sure if it has something to do with my being lazy, and it may. It may have something to do with my lack of discipline. I confess that, too. Or it may be that even way back then there was an intellectual problem that I had with prayer that I was unwilling to admit to, which perhaps short-circuited any vital prayer experience. I’m not sure.

For a sermon on prayer in the midst of this congregation it would be smart of me if I would let my colleague Peter preach. But on occasion over the years, I have helped someone when I have spoken about prayer and my own difficulties. It seemed to give them some hope, having a lousy prayer life themselves.

Still, I pray, for prayer is the heart and soul of religious experience. My life is a dialogue. I am talking to myself all the time, and praying may be talking to oneself in the presence of that greater reality into which our lives are woven. It may be consciousness and awareness in the face of the web of meaning, the tapestry of reality of which we are a part. Certainly I pray, as I think we must all pray.

Perhaps it was why I responded positively to Thomas Moore's book, for he has a chapter entitled "The Instinct for Prayer" in which he speaks about an impulse to pray. And I know that. Don't you? To be human is to have an instinct to pray, to bring to expression that which is in our depths. There are those situations in life when we have the impulse to pray, when there is that spontaneous eruption from within. And so, prayer really is the heart and center of religious experience, the dialogue and conversation that goes on within us.

I speak about prayer with eyes wide open, because increasingly that is my experience. As I said a couple of weeks ago about the transformations through which I have gone in my spiritual journey, I have moved from a supernatural theism to a religious naturalism, where God is not "out there" somewhere, waiting upon my prayers in order to manipulate the human situation. God is not beyond the reality of which we are a part, running things and waiting to be influenced by the volleys of prayers from earth's children. I don't believe that. I don't think one can think intelligently about that and carry on the practice with any vitality.

There are recent studies about the effectiveness of prayer for people with illness, but I'm not too impressed with that, either. What do those kinds of studies finally prove? If we need to prove that prayer works, are we really afraid that God doesn't exist and that there is nothing to it? I suppose there is some value in that sort of study, but I would rather not go there. I would rather pray with eyes wide open, recognizing that the whole of reality is of a piece, and that it is shot through with God; that the whole of reality is a seamless robe pregnant with divinity; that my life and your life is a part of a totality laced with creativity, and to the extent that we come to an awareness and an appreciation of the reality of which we are a part, our prayer will flow. I think Thomas Moore is right. There is an instinct for prayer and we ought to go along with it without too much intellectual machination, trying to figure it out. The Psalmist, for example, wrote a beautiful ejaculatory expression: "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my cry. Hear my voice." The Psalmist made a plea for forgiveness, resting in the graciousness of God. "Lord, if you should mark iniquities, who could stand, but with you there is forgiveness."

I have been there, haven't you? When we have failed, when we come face to face with our flaws, and then experience the grace of forgiveness through that spontaneous eruption, we say, "O Lord, out of the depths I cry to thee."

Or perhaps in its original form prayer was that kind of ejaculatory expression in the face of our helplessness. For in the face of the mystery of life we often feel helpless, knowing there is more of our existence beyond our control than that little piece over which we have control. And so, perhaps out of fear, or out of wonder, or in the face of great joy, we pray. We cry to the Lord. Out of our depths there erupts the expression of those deep emotions that are so much a part of who we are. Prayer can be that kind of spontaneous expression.

And then there is the prayer of awareness. I think of that passage of Mark's Gospel where Jesus has the whole village at the doorstep of Peter's mother-in-law's home. Jesus had healed her and now the word is out that he is there, and so they bring everybody to the doorstep. Through the evening he reaches out, giving of himself in his healing ministry. The next morning, Mark tells us, a long while before dawn he arose and found a solitary place and he prayed. I suppose that is how one lives with intentionality. I suppose that is how one keeps from getting swept away with inordinate success or bitter disappointment, by having that encounter, that moment of awareness, that attention in the presence of God. If I had been Jesus and had a successful evening such as that, I would have gotten up before breakfast and put posters on every telephone pole about the time of the next healing service. But Jesus prayed. And when they came after him and said, "Hey, we have something good going, Lord," he said, "Let's get out of here." He had found his center in the presence of God.

There is that prayer of awareness and attention, that self-consciousness in the presence of the other that enables us to keep our balance. And there is the love and care expressed in prayer. We express our love and care by saying to one another, "I'll pray for you." I don't know how many of us actually do it, but we all tend to say it, and when someone we love, or when we ourselves come into crisis, again it is simply natural and instinctive to pray.

About three or four weeks ago, one of my closest friends, a colleague in ministry for over forty years and a person known to this congregation, Bud Ridder, experienced a stroke. When I got the news, it impacted me greatly because I realized how meaningful that relationship is to me. I said to him, "I came to see again how much I love you." Although he came out of the stroke rather well, the doctors discovered an aneurysm and announced the necessity of serious surgery. Last Tuesday at lunch at Duba's, because Bud is a member of the table, we discussed his forthcoming surgery. We raised our glass to him with eyes wide open and expressed our love and care and how we would carry him in our hearts and in our minds. We actually talked at the table about prayer. "We will pray for you," we said, meaning we care for you, we love you, we yearn for all of the recuperative, health-giving, life-giving powers within you to be released in the presence of our love and care.

When I called Friday afternoon, knowing that he had gone into surgery at seven o'clock in the morning, he wasn't back into recovery. Nor at five. Nor at nine. The

one word I did get was critical, and I couldn't get through to the family because of some phone problem, but I left a message on a voice machine. Saturday morning I got the call. He'd been in surgery twice and the surgeon had been with him for sixteen hours. Bud was hanging on by his fingernails.

I had a wedding to do south of Grand Rapids, so I intended to do the wedding and on my way back stop at the hospital. But there was another call. The signs were going down. I went directly to the hospital to be there with the family. And I saw him. If you've ever seen one who has come through that kind of trauma, you know.

I had to do my wedding, but when I came back to the hospital the bed was removed. I found he was in surgery again, a third time.

And so, I sat with his wife, Lenora. I just sat with her. Her pastor came and I sat through that and we had prayer with eyes closed and hands held. I remained because I was determined to stay until the surgeon came back, and when he came back, the news was somewhat good. They thought they had things stabilized. But, he said, "The trauma the body has experienced is extreme. He is critically ill." And he left.

There I was with Lenora. How do you leave? I left with eyes wide open. I told her I would be preaching today about prayer and the only way I knew to pray for Bud and for her was face to face and to say, "I hold you in my heart," because I believe that with all of the marvelous technology and the tremendous dedication of medical people, there is a process underway. I stand by that process and wait and hope, believing that my presence and my love and my care are the only prayer that can make a difference.

I don't say these things because I know them. I only share with you my experience, and I know that I have never had a successful devotional life in decades. But I pray all the time, with eyes wide open, feeling myself part of the web of life and meaning and community that is you. For me, that is enough.

Moore, Thomas. *The Soul's Religion*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2002.