

How Can I Pray?

From the series: Can I Honestly Believe?

Text: Genesis 32:24; Psalm 139:23; Luke 11:1

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I had thought that I had entitled the message today, "Can I Pray?" and I thought all I had to say was, "Surely. The offering will be received and let's go to the beach." But then I realized that it was, "How Can I Pray?" and that puts a little different light on it, and as I speak this morning about prayer, I want to say this: To speak about prayer is to speak about the most intimate devotional relationship of one's life, and one ought to do it with great sensitivity. Preaching about prayer is not praying. Preaching about prayer is taking a step back and thinking about prayer, and that's a far cry from the act itself, the devotion itself. I want to say this morning in regard to this subject, and it's always true about every subject, that no one can answer such a question for you. Only you know if you can pray. No tyrant in a political role can deny you that, that inner sanctum of the person that is holy ground and, thank God, no one can control that inward being. And in this relationship, no preacher can tell you, either.

You may say to me, "Well, we look to you for guidance."

That's fair enough. I'll think in your presence. I'll think out loud, and as I think out loud, I hope you're thinking silently so that we're having a real conversation. But I'm not an authority figure and I refuse to be that for you. If you see me as an authority figure, I want to say to you, grow up. Get off on your own. I cannot bear the weight of your soul. I'm going to do the best I can and honestly struggle with the questions that I think are very, very important, critical questions in the living of our lives and in our relationship to that Ultimate Mystery that is God. But, don't take me seriously. Don't believe what I say just because I say it. *Listen* to what I say. *Argue* with what I say. *Debate* me. You're grown people, and the church too long has fostered a kind of dependency and kept people in a state of immaturity, as though if the minister said it, it's so. Well, it's just not so, especially if this minister says it.

As I speak a bit about prayer this morning, I am conscious that there are those of you out there who are farther along in the school of prayer than I ever will be. And there are those of you who have a deeper experience of prayer than I've ever

had and, when I speak about prayer this morning, I will be seeking to clarify some questions. I've long since known that my greatest contribution to the human race would not be to provide answers, but rather, to help people clarify the questions, because what good would it do if I said to you, "Cease praying, it makes no sense." Would you stop? Or, if I said, "Oh, indeed, it makes a lot of sense." Would you start or keep on doing it? I wanted to say that this morning about this particular message about prayer, but I want to say it generally. Don't believe everything I say. Just engage with me in some thoughtful reflection. That's my responsibility. And you carry yours, as well.

So, how can I pray? Well, the context for the question is the series that we're in and that series began with my talking about religion, in which I made the claim that religion is a human, creative, imaginative construct. Religion is a human phenomenon. Whatever in-breaking of mystery, whatever experience and encounter of the sacred and the holy, whatever that may be, and whatever may be behind that, the human family has responded to that sense of awe before mystery with the construction of religious systems, things that are believed, modes of worship, manner of living. Basically, that's what human religion is. That's what our Christian tradition is - a set of beliefs, a manner of worship, a mode of living. And, if that is true, then I suggested to you that it is time we worked on the image of God. Again, not *because* I say so, but because generally as a part of the whole western culture of which we are a part, the theistic idea of God has been called in question. Maybe not by you and, if not by you, then for goodness sakes, you can leave right now. You don't need to listen any further. But there are a lot of our contemporaries who are having difficulty with the theistic conception of God, which is a conception of God which has marked the whole western tradition, that is the God of our hymns, of our prayers, of our liturgies, of our everyday, common thinking about God. When we talk about calling in question the theistic conception of God, that is, a God "out there," a Supreme monarch, ruling, directing, employing invasive processes once in a while, a God episodic in that God dips in here and there and, what would appear from the human point of view, capriciously, arbitrarily, monkeys in this point and dabbles in that point, but a God supreme, omniscient, all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful - that conception of God that I grew up with in Sunday School, that I for many years preached from the pulpit - that God, that conception of God is in trouble.

Now, if religion is a human construct, that doesn't mean that God is in trouble. It means that a conception of God has been called into question. And if that conception is not a problem for you, you have no problem whatsoever with what I'm going to be saying. But, if it is a problem for you, then, you see, if God is not that enthroned monarch out there somewhere, then that's where this question of prayer comes in. Then what does prayer mean? If God is not a larger-than-life supernatural parent in the sky, then what does it mean to pray? That's the question.

I cited in your liturgy the section from Marcus Borg's book, *The God We Never Knew*. I like Marcus Borg because, when I meet him, when I talk with him, when I read his writings, I feel he's a person who has had a spiritual experience. Marcus Borg speaks a language or in a tone quality that resonates with me. And yet, he *thinks* about it. He's thought about it very deeply and he acknowledges that the old image of God made it impossible for him any longer to pray; he could not pray to that God "out there" enthroned in the heavens, controlling things on earth. He needed a new image of God, and so he was working at that. So, he says, "I couldn't operate with that old image." At that point many of our contemporaries have ceased to pray.

You realize that; that's why many have simply dropped out of the spiritual endeavor at all, because that didn't make sense, so one just gives it up.

Marcus Borg is unwilling simply to give it up. He says, "How can I image God, then, so that prayer becomes a continually meaningful experience for me?" And he is clearer at what he cannot conceive of than how it works. I like a person who says, "I don't know how it works. I can't explain it." But, he says, "I know this - that old thing doesn't work. For example, in relationship to the Holocaust, if God controls human history and the Holocaust happens, then God is a devil."

It's time for the pulpit to do some plain speaking. How long have we hidden behind the idea of mystery, or, God simply doesn't reveal God's decrees, or someday we'll understand. That's ridiculous. If God could stop the Holocaust and God didn't stop the Holocaust, then something's wrong with God. That kind of God I can't believe in. I can't worship. Marcus Borg is quite right. Let's get *honest* about it. Obviously, that is not the kind of God that we really worship, a God Who's pulling strings here and there. That just doesn't work. He says I still make requests, but it seems to be the natural way for me to care for another, and when I pray, it's my attending to my relationship to God.

Well, the theologian that probably popularized in common understanding across the church and beyond this whole idea of a God "out there" that was out of style was John A. T. Robinson, the Anglican Bishop, and in his little book published in 1963, *Honest to God*, which created such a stir, obviously if he began saying that image of God out there enthroned beyond the universe doesn't work for me, then obviously he has to deal with this question of prayer, and so he, too, on the cover of your liturgy says, "What is, then, intercession?" Can we have even a non-religious idea of prayer? Well, he struggles to say, when I care for another with an ultimate concern, isn't that the heart of intercession? In other words, if I open myself up to another person, if I care about that person, if the compassion flows out of me to another, if there is an ultimate concern in that relationship, then is not in that relationship the presence of another? Is that not to involve God in the relationship, or is that not what it means to have God in a relationship? And if that does make some sense, I think it probably is what the writer of first John was saying in the fourth chapter, when he says the one who loves abides in God and

God abides in that one. In the horizontal relationship there is the experience of that other dimension full of awe. And if that is the case in a human relationship, person-to-person, might it not be true also in that relationship one has to oneself?

Now, I don't know about this, but I've been thinking about the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, or with a man. It's an old, old tale of patriarchs. Jacob's been a cheat and a deceiver and a manipulator. Now he's on the threshold of facing his brother and it's as though the film of his life runs before him and he wrestles all night. I don't think there was anybody out there. I think Jacob was wrestling with Jacob, don't you? Jacob had a relationship to Jacob. There is a self-consciousness about us. That's what marks us as human beings. We jump out of our skin and look at our self. We survey our life; we examine our self, our motives, our reactions. We look over the story of our life; we get out of ourselves and look at ourselves. There is also a relationship between myself and me, and is not that perhaps what it means to wrestle with God? Is that just a mumbling monologue within my own psyche, or is that precisely the area? Is there a kind of objectivization of myself, where I am able to see myself, and in that seeing myself, see myself not off in some dark corner, but conscious that my life is an open book, and before some objective reality greater than myself, I stand either in integrity or without integrity, either in wholeness or in brokenness, either with some sense of serenity or total disarray. And is that not to pray?

The Psalmist was aware that he didn't make himself. The Psalmist was aware that there is something rather than nothing. The Psalmist, in beautiful poetic fashion, marvels before the wonder of the whole of reality into which his little life is laced. And then, something of that human rises in him, that hostility, the anger, and all of a sudden he becomes self-conscious and says, "Search me, O God," which is that searching more than my own coming to awareness of myself in the presence of a mystery that is greater than myself. What could be more effective in regard to prayer than just that?

Well, it's easier to say what doesn't seem to work than to come to understand what does work. We have poets who are struggling to say it in a new way, the universe that Marcus Borg or John A. T. Robinson couldn't come to terms with in terms of the old image of prayers expressed marvelously well by an English scientist, Richard Dawkins. He is at the other end of the spectrum from a Marcus Borg or a Robinson; he is a reductionist who believes that everything is simply electronic charges and energy and so on. He says, "If the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, meaningless tragedies like the crashing of a bus are exactly what we should expect, along with equally meaningless good fortune, such a universe would be neither evil nor good in intention. It would manifest no intentions of any kind. In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice."

Don't you love it? I love smart. That's smart. That's clear. That's a hard-headed, honest statement. No religious, foggy mumbo-jumbo. And Richard Dawkins is not a demon. He would stand here and he could pile evidence upon evidence upon evidence to support this conclusion. There is nothing. Nobody. No mind, no purpose, nothing's going anywhere, it's all a chance kind of a thing popping off here and there, and where it will go, who will go. You can choose that with reasonably good data, or you can find others who will say, "That doesn't say enough for me. I choose to believe that there is operative something more in the whole cosmic process into which I have come, have emerged into consciousness." And some of those others are poets who are trying to say it in a new way.

Did you catch the hymns this morning? You did, didn't you? You were grumbling, I could see. Well, you can complain to Betty VanTil because she passed along to me that opening hymn a long time ago. "Praise God Whose Providential Awkwardness." Have you ever thought of providence being awkward? Well, take one look at the world. This God of ours is not very handy. Wouldn't you think that God could do a better job of putting things together? Praise God whose providential awkwardness defies our human scrutiny, whose wisdom looks like foolishness, whose purposes seem cloaked in mystery. And I love the fact that he says, "Praise God for what we fail to comprehend, for silence. Praise God for the fact that we are not God. Praise for the fact that our arrogance is often reduced to silence, where we would better stand in awe, not knowing. And praise God Who gives us restless hearts and minds, Who still is both our Source and Resting Place."

Now, that's an image I can live with. I like that. The Source, Resting Place. The poet is trying to figure out how to say something in a manner which honors the data of which we are aware, of our world, which is so vastly different than the data out of which the old system was constructed.

The next hymn was written by W. H. Vanstone, an Anglican clergyman who wrote a book about God, who also could not believe in this God of omnipotence and omniscience and all of the *omnis* and all of the aura that we ascribe to the God that we want to be there, to be in control so we don't have to take responsibility for our own lives. Vanstone says, no, He's not that way. God is not that way. God is an abyss of love that is continually giving of itself in an anguishing, agonizing way to bring forth. You can meditate on this hymn for the rest of the week. "Open are the gifts of God, gifts of love to mind and sense;" ... that's obvious, he says. "Hidden is love's agony, love's endeavor, love's expense. Love that gives, gives evermore, gives with zeal, with eager hands, spares not, keeps not, all out-pours, ventures all, its all expands. Drained is love in making full, bound in setting others free, poor in making many rich, weak in giving power to be." And finally, here's God, "no monarch he, throned in easy state to reign; here is God, whose arms of love, aching, spent, the world sustain."

The poets are working at it, and you're going to have to work at it, too.

How can I pray? Well, begin by simply stopping long enough to be aware, attentive, in communion with your own soul. And, in communion with one's own soul, there may appear to be that other dimension, call it what you will. But, you see, prayer is the language of the soul. Prayer is the utterance of the heart. Prayer is that expression to which we must give expression, lest we burst. And so, how can you pray? Just be human, I think. And we'll keep thinking about it.

But, can you pray? Surely.

References:

Marcus Borg. *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*. HarperOne, 1998.

John A.T. Robinson. *Honest to God*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1963; 40th Anniversary edition, 2003.