

God, how do I pray?
The Feast of All Saints' ~ November 7, 2021
Isaiah 25:6-9 ~ John 11:32-44

Let us pray: Here we are God. Your people are listening. We are ready.
Guide us in your way, we pray, this day. Amen.

It is always a good idea to pray. When in doubt, pray. But we don't always know how to pray. Sometimes, we get lost in the details in our minds, or the issue at hand is so nuanced, or we've been knocked flat, or got our back against the wall. We get stuck – when we're not even sure about the intention, the desired outcome. What do I pray for in this situation?

The writer Anne Lamott suggests that it comes down to three elemental, three simple prayers: Help, Thanks, and Wow. Often voiced with emphasis – from the heart: Help! Thank you! Wow! Most of the time, that about sums it up. But not always. I'd like to share with you an equally simple approach to prayer that you may find valuable. Let me tell a story.

Some years ago, a woman I knew had been suffering with an illness for many years. Various treatments helped, but only to a point, and the treatments themselves were very taxing. This woman had a strong will and a remarkable capacity to frame even the most trying times in a positive light, finding joy in unlikely moments.

But it had been a long haul, and when the doctor proposed another round of treatment requiring heroic effort on her part, she decided that it was enough – at least, some part of her decided. I am sure she'd been weighing this in her heart and mind for some time before she invited me into her considerations. But invite me she did. To come to the hospital on a day when her husband would be there, and so too their adult children. A family gathering. It was an unusually warm day in the middle of winter so we sat outside and basked in the sun. She shared with us what

was on her heart. I don't remember all of it, and I don't remember the sequence, but I believe it included:

- I am tired. I have been trying. The doctors have been trying.
- I don't know what to do. I want to do what is good. I want to do what is right.
- I don't know what God wants me to do.
- I love you. I love each of you. I don't want to disappoint you. I don't want to leave you.
- But I have had a good and full life. I don't want any further treatment. And the time is come. And I am ready.

As she spoke these words, her husband and children drew near, gathered in with support, tears, and hugs. Her intention seemed clear, but she was looking for something more; she wasn't fully resolved. Did she want permission? Or blessing? "I am not sure what to pray for, not sure how to pray," she said to me. And in that holy moment I realized that every word she'd spoken was her prayer. We simply speak it to God. So I led us in her prayer – recounting her words the best I could, turning each sentence into intercession, thus:

I am tired, God. I have been trying, God. The doctors have been trying, God. God, I want to do what is good and what is right. I love my children, God. God, I have had a good and full life. And the time is come, God, and I am ready. Amen.

And she was ready, and her family was ready, and God was ready, and she is among the saints in light. And I have learned that, especially when I don't quite know what to pray, or how, this "not knowing" becomes my prayer. Along the way, someone taught me to pray: "God, how would **you** have me pray for this person? How would you have me pray in this situation?" When I am at a loss, I try to remember to remember God, because God is here, and remembers me – and us.

I share this story with you because I received this experience as a gift, and I want you to have it too. I share this story because even when not faced with decisions of life and death, I find that I can get knocked off center, lose my bearings, and get all tangled up and act in ways that hurt the ones I love, that hurt me. And all the ups and downs of these recent months knock us off center more often it seems than before.

We all get knocked off center. The question is how to regain our footing, our place. When I speak of being centered, I mean most importantly of experiencing ourselves as beloved – as loved by God, as loveable, as love-worthy. And to trust in that love, rest in that love, act from that love. And being beloved, then connected, part of the whole – with one another and all the saints. Such that when other voices lead us astray or diminish or demean our selfhood as a child of God, we can take a deep breath, center our selves, and take the next step back into the fray.

We are each and all and always beloved of God. But on the days we lose sight of that truth, the daily practices help us regain that sight, can be literal life savers: the practice of prayer when we arise each day, and before we sleep – even a brief prayer of gratitude: “Hi God, it’s me. Show me the way today.” “Thank you, God – for this, for that; for her and for them.” The practice of generosity and compassion – to give of ourselves, for the care of another and care of the world. There are other daily practices – of creativity, of joy in creation, of reading God’s holy Word.

On this feast of All Saints’, our collect – or gathering prayer – affirms, “Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord.” In the Book of Revelation, this mystical body is spoken of as “a great cloud of witnesses.” In the

practice of prayer, we may see ourselves within this company, this magnificent motley throng, the beloved community.

I live my life differently as a result of believing that all who have gone before me are part of that mystical body, as are those yet unborn, and that I too shall one day join those saints in light – not by dint of my good deeds, but thanks to God’s good grace and mercy.

We’re given two stories today. The church commends the passage from Isaiah be read on three occasions: this feast of All Saints’, for Easter, and for the celebration of life at our funeral. Isaiah spoke these words of promise into a dark time for the Hebrew people, that despite all evidence to the contrary, God will do three things: prepare a great feast – of well-aged wines and rich food filled with marrow. That God will remove the shroud of darkness, doubt, and death that covers us and all the world; that God will wipe away every tear. Receive the Word of God’s intimate love spoken by Isaiah as gift for your heart and mine.

Coupled with this is the story of Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary, whom Jesus raised from the dead. If we take this story at face value and set aside questions of how, why, or to what end, we’re left with the simple affirmation: this is what Jesus did; this is what Jesus does. With Jesus, those captive are released, the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, those who mourn are comforted, and the dead are given new life. If for them, perchance for us. And if for us, how then shall we live?

Wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

“If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke - Aye! and what then?”

Let us pray: Here we are God. Your people are listening. We are ready. Give us new life. Guide us in your way, we pray, this day. Amen.