

Will You Pray for Me?

Rev. Roger Jones
Sunday, October 23, 2016
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #201 Glory, Glory, Hallelujah! #123 Spirit of Life; #126 Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Special Music: Count on Me (by Bruno Mars, Philip Lawrence, Ari Levine) sung by Zoe D. (age 5)

Sermon

At the end of this month, I will begin the first leg of my sabbatical, taking time away from this ministerial position to study, write, rest, reflect, and renew myself. If you are new to UUSS and this is news to you, there's plenty of [sabbatical information](#) on our website and in the [newsletter](#).

As the time to leave has approached I've had stress about getting loose ends tied up and clearing the clutter off my desk. Furthermore, I realize I'll miss you and your kids and grandkids. I will miss our weekly encounters here. I will miss sharing the good work of our leadership teams and committees. All this has generated in me too much anxiety, distraction and impatience in recent weeks. I'd hate to see what I'd be like if I had not been exercising, meditating or praying a few times a week. But even spiritual practices like these have not been quite enough to settle me down and center my soul. So, I'm asking you, will you pray for me?

"Pray? What does he mean by *pray*?"—At least one of you will say this to yourself. Actually, several of you might say that.

"Pray?! That is not a rational or effective use of my time!"

I can respect that opinion. To be sure, the word *prayer* has many ridiculous associations in this country. The television evangelist praying to avert a hurricane, or to inflict one on a city. The misguided relative praying for a family member not to be gay—just pray away the gay, is the way some conservative Christians call it. The friend who asks us to pray for them to win the lottery. The driver of a car in a parking lot at the mall or Trader Joe's or downtown, praying for a space to open up. You've never prayed for that, have you? The Chicago Cubs fans praying for a World Series win. Clearly God does not answer *their* prayers, with the possible

exception of once every 108 years. It's easy to dismiss prayers as fairy tales and fiction. But that is not the *genre* for prayer, at least not to me. I think prayer is more like poetry, more like singing. Indeed, many songs *are* prayers.

As one of your ministers, I have the perspective to see the diversity of spiritual practices and religious beliefs among the people of this congregation. Those of us who minister to this congregation know that we are not the only ones here who pray. It's time we bring prayer out of the closet. While many Unitarian Universalists *don't* do something they'd call prayer, other UUs do. Members and friends have asked me to pray for them or for someone they care about. They thank me on a Sunday here when my spoken prayer has mentioned a tragedy or a recent atrocity weighing on our hearts. People at UUSS have invited me to pray with them. I am grateful for the invitation.

A couple of times I've been surprised. In a pastoral meeting or a hospital visit, I say something like, "What would you like before we part?" The other person might say, "I think a prayer would be nice." We join hands quietly, and while I am thinking of words to say, the other person just plunges in!

"I pray for strength," they say. "I pray for my family member to find peace. I pray for serenity and wisdom." I didn't need to say anything at all. So that's one thing about prayer. Anybody can do it. It seems that all we need sometimes is permission, or encouragement. Consider yourself encouraged to try it.

Prayer can be a way of centering ourselves, clearing our head, calming our hearts. It's also a way of expressing joy, gratitude, sorrow, sadness, anger, hope or longing. It's a way of reconnecting to the values we care about, the people we care about, and this world we love.

People ask me to remember them in my prayers, and I say yes. But I bet people ask some of *you* to pray for them too. If you don't have a practice that you'd call prayer, this can feel awkward. You don't know what to say. How about *yes*? When we say, "Yes, I'll pray for you," this is what I think we mean. It means: I care for you. I want the best for you. If you need strength, I want

to give you strength. If you need hope, I want to encourage you. If you seek healing, I want you to experience healing. I wish the best for you.

It means, I see you. I hear you. Perhaps, when we say *I'm praying for you*, what it means the most is: you are not forgotten. Praying is another way of saying: I am holding you in my heart.

So, people have asked me—and maybe asked you—to pray for them. Why don't I ask you to pray for me? Will you pray for me?

I understand some of you might say: What or whom should I pray to? I think that is the least important part of prayer. Mohandas Gandhi said this: in prayer, "it is better... to have a heart without words than words without a heart." The words don't matter as much as the feeling, the intention, the heart of it. You could join the many UUs who pray "to whom it may concern."

Pray to whatever feels grounding to you, whatever feels receptive of your hopes and wishes. It could be the divine, it could be our earth or Mother Nature, or it could be your own heart. You could think of God in a larger sense. Think of God as the source of love, as a loving presence, one in which we participate. The embrace of love is there whether we name it, speak to it, call on it, or feel it. But when we participate in it, its embrace widens. This is prayer: to widen the embrace of love.

Join me now for a few of what I call prayer openings. In silence now, think about how your mind and heart might respond to these openings.

Spirit of Life, let me give thanks for the gift of life and the gift of this day.

This is what I am grateful for...

This is what I am glad I am able to do...

Spirit of Love, be with me. Blessed be.

Being one of your ministers means that I make it a practice to hold you in my heart. Before I meditate in silence in the morning, I whisper some prayers. I call to mind friends, colleagues, and relatives, and send them good wishes. I make myself say the name of relatives I don't even want to talk to. I also think of this congregation, and I name some of you, especially those who have asked me to. I lift up your name if I know you need comfort, healing or hope. I will say your name in

prayer. I hope you can see now, why it's important to wear a name tag every Sunday. But there is nothing special about my style of prayer.

I've told the story before of my friend Bill, who cooks steel cut oatmeal nearly every morning, taking his time. As he cuts the apples and rinses the berries, he goes over in his mind the people he cares about: siblings, spouse, kids and grandkids, and his friends. That's his prayer practice.

Prayer cannot bring down a Godly smiting of others, even if we are sure they deserve it. Prayer can't do that, and it couldn't stop a deadly disease from ravaging the body of my best friend, or from taking a relative at an early age. But I prayed anyway. It can't stop dementia from eviscerating the cognitive abilities of a parishioner or a parent who has been so lively and creative. But maybe it can give us a little more ease, or patience, or gratitude.

A useful image for prayer comes from the Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers. John, my close friend who passed away last May, was an active Quaker. He was encouraging and supportive to so many people. When I would be going through a rough patch, he would conclude a supportive email or phone conversation with the phrase, "Holding you in the light..." His Quaker tradition speaks of the light within every person and the light of God, which are one and the same. "I'm holding you in the light" was his Quaker equivalent of saying, I am holding you in prayer. When his cancer knocked him down again and again, I'd say the same thing back, "Holding you in the light." It didn't seem like much to say it, but to hear it, it meant everything.

To pray is to speak from the heart, whether it's by yourself or with another person. But first, before speaking, prayer involves listening. Listening to silence, or to your heart and especially listening to another person. I have a story about one of my visits with [Faithful Friends](#). That is a program of people from UUSS and a few other UU congregations in this area. From our UUSS website, this is the description: Faithful Friends offer connection and support to immigrants detained at the Homeland Security ICE Unit in a county jail: Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center. We do this by making visits or by sending cards or letters. We always welcome new volunteers to help out.

The purpose of our visits is to reduce the sense of isolation for the person we meet on the other side of the glass. We do this especially by listening. Sometimes a detainee will ask a volunteer to pray for them or their family. This can feel awkward, as we have to communicate through the glass by holding telephone receivers. Usually, when one of our volunteers is asked to pray, they will ask what the person wants them to pray for. They will pause and reflect. Then they might ask... for hope and strength for their friend on the other side of the glass. They pray for comfort and courage. They pray for the detained person to know they are not forgotten... by God, or us or by the people they care about. If we are genuine, and take our time, sharing that quiet moment can be nourishing for the person on the other side of the glass, and for us.

One day, I stood in the jail's waiting room before I was allowed in to meet one of the detainees. I was wearing my black shirt and white clerical collar. A man and his wife were standing near me waiting to see her son, his step-son, who was in the regular part of the jail. We chatted awhile. Then we were let into the visiting area, and they were sitting next to me, waiting for their son.

As I tried to stay connected to the person sitting across the glass from me and on the phone receiver, I was distracted by the stepfather's lecturing of the young man. He told him what he needed to do to get his life in order and get back on track when he got out of jail. After my own visit concluded, the stepfather asked me if I would come over and say a prayer through the glass for his stepson. Okay. I scooted over one seat and the parents stood behind me. I introduced myself to this young man sitting in jail. It seemed presumptuous to pray with someone without getting to know him a little bit.

I asked questions and waited for the answers. I learned how long he'd been there and why. Driving under the influence, *with his baby in the car...* which is reckless endangerment. I asked him to tell me more... how he felt about it... his hopes for the future and his intentions. He said he wanted to avoid putting people in danger again, and not drink again. "Have you been to a 12-Step meeting here in the jail, or any other kind of group?" I asked. He said no, he had not heard about one. "Would you be interested?" Yes, he said. "Why don't you ask a social worker about it?" Okay, he said.

"Do you want a prayer?" I asked. "Yes," he answered. Asking him all those questions gave me a chance to think about what I might pray for, so it really would be for him. I said: "Let us pray. God, I am here with Michael. I am praying that he will know that he is loved. We are thankful that nobody was hurt when he was driving the car. We are thankful that he can take responsibility for his mistake. Let Michael know he is forgiven. Give him the courage to avoid causing harm in the future. Help him reach out and ask for support from others. Help him to make the right choice, one day at a time. May he know that he is loved. Amen."

I'm not sure if that's exactly what I said, but those are the bases I covered. I'm not sure it did any good, but he thanked me. I think it was better than it would have been if I hadn't listened to him. It did not take a black shirt with a white clerical collar for me to pray, it only took listening first. And most of us can listen. Even if that's all we do, we can listen.

Here is a prayer for listening to our own heart:

Spirit of Life,

Help me be present to what is going on. This is what is going on...

This is what I am longing for...

So may it be.

A few years ago here I led an Adult Enrichment series on prayer. At one of them, everybody took two names at random from among the class members. This was my instruction: "Don't tell us what names you have, and especially don't tell the people that you have their names. Before the next class, please call to mind these two people. Just think about them. Hold them in your heart. Do this every day, or every other day, or at least once during the week."

At the next week's class, I asked, "What was it like to pray for those two people?" Most of them said it lifted their awareness; it gave a warm feeling. It was good. Then I asked: "What was it like to know that another person was praying for you?" Most of them said, "*I forgot* anyone was praying for me!" For this group, the most powerful and enlivening experience was to pray for others. So consider yourself invited to try that.

While I am away, I will pray for this congregation and its continuing vitality, courage, and generosity. I will pray for those of you who have told me things you care about. I will hold you in the light. And I ask you to hold me in the light.

Pray for me. Pray for me to be productive in my study and writing project. Pray for me to learn how to find fun and love outside of the demands of work and to find adventure outside of my habits and my comfort zone. Pray for me to travel safely. To restore my spiritual energies and feel again the stirrings of compassion. Will you pray for me? Will you hold me in the light? I will strive to pray for you, every day.

I'd like to close with a time of contemplation. I will recite some sentences that might be helpful in the practice of this *genre* called prayer or, if you prefer, the practice of personal contemplation. Some of these openings, are fill-in-the-blank, but there is no right answer.

Spirit of Love, be with me now and in the days ahead.

These are the people I'm holding in the light...

These are my prayers for my human family, for this world, for this planet.... These are the blessings I would send...

Help me live this day with grace, courage and integrity.... Help me to live every day, with kindness...

Amen and blessed be. Namaste.

Hymn #123: Spirit of Life

Handout in the Order of Service:

<p style="text-align: center;">Suggested Sentences for Contemplation or Prayer on Your Own</p> <p>Spirit of Life,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Let me give thanks for the gift of life and the gift of this day.</p> <p>This is what I am grateful for...</p> <p>This is what I am glad I am able to do...</p> <p>Spirit of Love, be with me.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Help me be present to what is going on. This is what is going on...</p> <p>This is what I am longing for...</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Give me serenity and wisdom.</p> <p>These are the people I'm holding in the light...</p> <p>These are the blessings I would send...</p> <p>These are my prayers for my human family, this world, this planet...</p> <p>Help me live this day with courage and integrity...</p> <p>Help me to live this day with kindness...</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Now let me take some time in silence to pay attention to my breathing and my surroundings and all my blessings.</p>
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