

Oh, for Praying Out Loud

A Prairie Group response paper on Prayer by Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer to
Rev. Kathleen Rolenz's paper, "Teach Us To Pray"

November, 2013

I am grateful for the privilege to respond to Rev. Kathleen Rolenz's thoughtful and helpful paper. I was delighted she used Romans 8, "*the spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words*," as that text has become central in my own practice since being framed in *Lectio Divina* during my time in Lutheran seminary. It has been a grounding and sustaining prayer for me.

Last year, I began a 30-minute silent meditation gathering every weekday where I serve. It drew few people; from just myself (who knows if God showed up; we didn't even have "two or three gathered") up to half a dozen. It began and ended with a silent chalice lighting and a singing bowl. One day, a long-time member came for the first time. After 20 minutes of silent prayer, I heard his voice: "Well, I guess you can out-meditate me!" I blinked my eyes open; I guess prayer was over.

What the daily gathering offered me was a way to engage my own spiritual practice, among others, which didn't require preparation; it was a rare time to worship rather than lead worship. It also offered a realization: our people are interested in, but few have the skills for or comfort with, prayer.

I agree with Rev. Rolenz that we are charged to teach, model, and practice prayer in our congregations. Accordingly, we are charged to find ways through the tangled thicket of obstructions, which separate our people from a deeply nourishing and sustaining prayer life. This will take many forms, may not be easy, and will call for deep patience as our people move from discussion to devotion.

Rev. Rolenz rightly lifts up some challenges for our faith, including semantics, theological diversity, past experience, etc. Due to many in our faith being ambivalent, avoidant or even resentful of prayer, there are few opportunities to engage prayer in our congregations. If we don't pray at church, why, and how, would our people pray elsewhere? To encourage such practice among our people, it takes baby steps, intentionality, and a deep sense of covenantal relationship.

I was struck when Rev. Rolenz wrote, “...*parishioners who are no longer concerned that I might try to impose those beliefs on them.*” From my own experience of being an open theist from the pulpit and having a natural “prairie protestant preacher” style that screams Christianity whether I like it or not, and being in a congregation whose history was not overly welcome to things “spiritual,” relationship is deeply important. Those with whom I have connected on other levels do not fear my Sunday morning prayer addressed to “*God of many names and beyond all names; Source of Love, Spirit of Wisdom, Fountain of Justice*” (a quasi-Trinitarian formula, perhaps not so surprising from me). My prayer does not scare them, because they trust me. My hope would be that over time, more of our people would develop a deep spiritual integrity and practice that roots and sustains them, so that any prayer, whether pluralistic or rooted in one specific tradition, from someone they trust or a complete stranger, would not necessarily be seen as something to fear or disdain. This transformation can be healing for those with past wounds, and enlivening for those for whom prayer has never seemed like an option.

The only point of divergence, or perhaps different nuance, that I have with Rev. Rolenz’s paper, is around the use of other’s prayers. While we don’t differ much, I believe a deeper conversation about ritualistic prayers, traditional prayers, and using the prayers of others is an important aspect of this work.

Recently I served as Chaplain for the Midwest Youth Leadership School. I led a daily centering time for the youth and staff. Every time, I used the same invitation that I use at my church: “*My brothers and sisters, breathe deep the breath of life. Set down the weight of the world and rest here; know that you are held by an unconditional love.*” One youth asked for these words to use as part of their own spiritual practice. What I found in that response, and the experience of these gatherings, was a deep hunger for spiritual practice. People were eager to close their eyes, to sit deeply and reverently. They were eager to rest into a practice that was guided, where they did not need to create something. They were eager to pray.

I find that our people long to enter into a sacred space and point of reverence that they need not create themselves. This is where traditional prayers or repeated prayers (spoken or sung) seem like a wonderful resource in my own prayer life and prayer

leading. Here, written prayers seem valuable as well, as they provide a frame for the pray-er to not worry about words escaping them in the moment, or for repeated prayer practice.

Perhaps in traditional prayers spanning centuries, or creating new prayers that are ritualistically prayed with repetition and consistency (in personal practice or as part of communal worship), we can find an important sense of rootedness. It seems the benefits of traditional, or repetitive prayers, are allowing people to (1) enter into a prayer without feeling anxiety around expressing themselves “rightly” or sounding as eloquent as a gifted spontaneous pray-er; (2) connect with narratives spanning centuries; (3) stay humble, keeping one’s ego in check by entering prayer as something other than individual intellectual exposition (as Thomas Merton reminds us, “*The gift of prayer is inseparable from another grace; that of humility...When we seem to possess and use our natural faculties in a completely autonomous manner, as if our individual ego were the pure source and end of our own acts, then we are in illusion...however spontaneous they seem to be, [these prayers can] lack spiritual meaning and authenticity*”¹); and (4) draw on familiar words in the midst of crisis when creating one’s own words is anxiety-producing instead of grounding or comforting. As Erik Walker Wikstrom writes, “...repetitive prayers “sink” into a person...they move from the head to the heart...the rhythm of the prayer descends into you...becomes part of you...”². I want our people to feel free, and equipped, to pray either spontaneously or by heart, and our modeling of prayer in worship is critical for how open and wide that invitation is.

This type of prayer sustains me every day, most often in sung prayer. Prayers that have been prayed from generation to generation, by a great cloud of witnesses spanning time and space, sustain me. In our principle that “*revelation is not sealed*,” I believe wisdom continues to speak in new ways, which includes continual revelation from old words. As the Zaleski’s write, “Many feel that there is no better way to preserve the sense of the sacred than to pray in the language of one’s ancestors, a language set apart for that purpose, undefiled by the marketplace, undeformed by passing fads.”³ I fear, in a

¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1969), 70.

² Erik Walker Wikstrom, *Simply Pray: A Modern Spiritual Practice to Deepen Your Life*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005), 50-51.

³ Philip and Carol Zaleski, *Prayer: A History*, (New York: Mariner Books, 2005), 253-254.

nation that is light on tradition and heavy on innovation, and in a faith tradition that has a tendency of giving our people more wings than roots, “*onward and upward forever*”, these prayers may provide a taproot for the journey. In the same way that Rev. Rolenz asks us to boldly pray, without apology, in a variety of contexts, it may be grounding and empowering for our congregants to lift up prayers that are not our own, giving symbolic permission for them to do the same.

I believe this is our call to prayer; to teach and lead prayer that is *both* innovative and new, *and* rooted and repetitive: spoken, sung, silent. As Rumi reminds us, *there are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground*. I trust that whatever mistakes we make or obstacles we struggle with, the work is worthy, and the spirit intercedes. As mystic Mira encourages us, “*...In this starving world that feeds – let feed! Best that many dishes are set before us; as we become less caged we will pick wisely like the golden falcon over fertile plains, like the mountain deer in spring lush valleys...In this sorrowful world why tamper with anything that lifts our spirits.*”⁴ I pray that we will weave our strands of prayers, of practices, varied and beautiful, into a fabric of faith strong enough to remind us of who we are, who we are yet to become, and the sacred thread, which binds us together, heart to heart, prayer to prayer. Let us say, and let our people say, Amen.

⁴ Excerpt from “A Scholar, a Lawyer and a Priest” by Mirabai, in Daniel Ladinsky, *Love Poems from God: Twelve Voices from the East and West*, (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002), 265.