

## **Some Thoughts on Prayer**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

29 October 2023

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Texts: Luke 6:12-19

Ephesians 6:10-18

*“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.”*

~ Ephesians 6:18

### **Prayer**

**Spirit of the Living God,**

**Quiet our minds and prepare our hearts**

**To reflect on your word for the church gathered in this place.**

**In Christ and through Christ, we make this prayer. Amen.**

The focus of the seminar I attended at the Montreat Conference Center at the beginning of this month was the religious, cultural and social shifts that are changing the landscape of Christianity in America, especially in the post-COVID world. Diana Butler Bass, who is one of the most highly respected scholars in the field of American religion and culture, was the keynote speaker at the conference, and Dr. Butler Bass pointed to a major shift in American society that is reshaping institutions and organizations, including the Church. For the first time in American history, political identity is becoming the most important identity for the vast majority of Americans. And in congregations across the country, a newfound fervor for social, economic and environmental causes driven mostly by political ideologies and loyalties is redefining theological discussions and biblical interpretations. Religious identity, which had historically co-existed and even mixed with politics throughout American history, is now being displaced by wokeness on the left and White Christian ethno-nationalism on the right.

In this new climate in which party affiliation and political activism are becoming the source of meaning, belonging and the moral center for a growing number of people in the pews, Diana Butler Bass noted that congregations are losing their diversity and are ageing more quickly. Millennials and Gen Z's are falling away from the churches where they were baptized, participated in youth groups, and confirmed their faith and are channeling their search for purpose, their longing for community, and their hope for a better future through heart, body and soul engagement in grassroots and political movements. Politics is becoming the de facto religion of many of the people who are in the pews and of most of the ones who are leaving the institutional Church. And this is a particularly complicated scenario in a country with a binary political system with only two choices where the winner-takes-all mentality stokes toxic polarization.

This heightened ideological divide, this intense passion for political ideas and values are drawing sharper lines within congregations and between denominations. Political identities are making people in the pews less likely to see someone who has a different opinion as a sibling in Christ or just that – a person with a mistaken or different opinion. Since 2016, truth has become a matter of personal opinion or political preference disconnected from the facts on the ground and this sectarian perception of what is true is not only dividing congregations along partisan lines, it is also instigating the emergence of a certain truth-possessing mindset that identifies anyone who is not part of the in-group, the “right” political party, the “correct” social movement as an evil opponent that must be defeated, punished, gagged, exorcised and banished. When politics is given the weight of existential and spiritual significance, the temptation is always to judge the worth of another person’s views, life choices, convictions, and even existence by what one considers to be the ultimate political truth of one party or side rather than seeing the other as a human being that bears God’s image and is also a beloved child of God.

Truth-possessing politics is simply not equipped to listen. It does not seek to understand. It is not kind or patient. It is essentially motivated by an adversarial thinking that divides the world into us versus them. The truth-possessing mindset cannot imagine that it could be wrong. It feeds off partisan outrage and anger. It seeks conformity rather than dialogue. Believers in the truth-possessing politics make partisan talking points the background soundtrack in their lives and quite often the Gospel, which requires that the followers of Christ pursue the way of truthfulness, is put on silent mode.

What political identity cannot grasp is that the transformative power of our faith tradition emanates not from a truth-possessing frame of mind but from bits of ageless truth-pursuing religious wisdom and Christian teachings that contradict this uncompromising worldview of partisan-politics-turned-into-quasi-religious-movement the most. Our Scripture cautions us about being too quick “**to see a smudge on [our] neighbor’s face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on [our] own.**”<sup>i</sup> Jesus instructed his followers to go the extra mile,<sup>ii</sup> turn the other cheek,<sup>iii</sup> love not only the person they recognized as a like-minded neighbor but even those they called enemies.<sup>iv</sup> At the heart of our faith are the imperatives to forgive,<sup>v</sup> to be compassionate,<sup>vi</sup> to do good to those who hate us,<sup>vii</sup> to strive to live in peace with everyone<sup>viii</sup> and to listen to Christ who prayed on the night before his arrest that those who would follow in his footsteps might all be one.<sup>ix</sup>

Following the 2020 presidential election, members of the First Congregational Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, became increasingly concerned about the decay of truth in American culture and the marked rise of this very divisive political identity within the Church. Rather than avoiding honest engagement with people they did not see eye to eye on political matters, five members of the progressive UCC congregation reached out to a conservative Evangelical church in town with the invitation to participate in an inter-congregational experiment in dialogue. The motivation behind this attempt to build bridges between people with widely dissimilar political identities was that their shared faith in a God of love and in the Christ of the Gospels might provide enough common ground to

foster an environment of trusting and graceful relationships. So, they did it. Five people from the UCC congregation met with five Evangelicals at a Presbyterian Church, which they considered to be a safe neutral ground, where they held four 90-minute meetings facilitated by a psychology professor. They managed to create a space where they practiced listening without necessarily trying to change each other's minds. But as one of the architects of the experiment put it, the exercise in seeking to understand was not as rosy as they had hoped. In the end, Evangelicals emphasized a religion of the heart and progressive Christians spoke of faith put into action. Evangelicals valued absolute clarity and liberals were more comfortable with complexity in matters of faith. Evangelical believed in a God of harsh judgment that condemns people to eternal life in hell and progressives chose to withhold judgment and put their confidence in a God of grace. Both the liberal and Evangelical Christians felt the need to broaden the understanding of God's truth and love for the people in the other grouping. Each believed that their Christianity was the real Christianity. In their own self-satisfied way, all the participants were convinced that the core truth in their own views, values, convictions and beliefs was better and truer than the truths held sacred by those on the other side of the political divide. They came to the meetings holding on to their truth-possessing mentality and the two groups opted for silence whenever political identities clashed rather than seeking a greater understanding of the truth that might enable them to reach beyond the hard lines of partisanship and tribalism through the hard work of Christian love.<sup>x</sup>

One of the lingering questions that stuck with one of the members of the First Congregational Church is crucial for the Church in America at this moment: how do we deepen our communion with each other, expand our understanding of truth or become aware of our errors if we who have ears do not listen with grace?

Listening is unquestionably a much needed and not often appreciated spiritual practice. In the Church, especially at a time of monumental shifts in culture, politics and religion, we ought to be aware of who gets our ears, who doesn't, who we have put on mute, who we would like to delete from our listening options and how much time we spend listening to voices that only echo our own chosen truths. But I wonder what might have happened if the progressive and Evangelical Christians had gathered not to participate in an intentional listening exercise but to pray with and for each other.

Prayer is an integral part of our faith tradition. The Gospels tell us that Jesus prayed. The Apostle Paul, whose letters are amongst the earliest writings in the New Testament, encouraged Christians to pray "***without ceasing***."<sup>xi</sup> We have a Prayer Ministry in our church. After the worship service, there are two church members who stand ready in the Conference Room to share the burdens, concerns, hopes and joys that people bring to church with them in a more intimate space and to pray with them for their worries, needs, healing, deliverance, spiritual longings and to thank God for the gift of their lives. Despite the precipitous decline in church attendance after COVID, the results of a survey released in the spring showed that 6 in 10 Americans pray regularly and throughout the day hoping to connect with a Higher Power to work through adversity, find meaning or cultivate a

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Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

richer spiritual life. Many Americans still pray at dawn or at bedtime, but the study revealed that 61% of the participants in the survey pray in the car. Millennials and Gen Zs prefer to pray with members of their spiritual group or family, but 80% of people pray by themselves. Nearly a quarter of all the respondents said that they pray routinely around their pets.<sup>xii</sup> What these numbers tell us is that there are more people praying each day in America than going to the gym, having sex, driving to work or attending church. And yet, prayer is a religious practice that raises profound theological questions for many of us who just said the words of the Prayer of the Day a few minutes ago.

Does prayer really work? Can prayers for peace bring an end to violence, war, and human suffering in Gaza and Ukraine? Does God break the laws of nature if we pray for the healing of a loved one with a terminal disease? Does God stick God's nose into our lives when we pray for each other and the world? Can prayer heal the divisions between liberal and conservative Christians or is praying a colossal waste of time? Does God ever answer our prayers or is praying nothing more than "***a pious form of talking to [ourselves]***"<sup>xiii</sup> or, worse still, "***a spasm of words lost in cosmic indifference?***"<sup>xiv</sup>

You and I pray because we believe God, the Giver of life and Maker of all things, is not indifferent to our longings, our hopes, our laughter and our tears. The practice of prayer requires both faith and a heart where God's Spirit has found a home. We cannot prove that there is a God who hears our prayerful words. We pray in faith that the Holy Spirit makes the words of our mouths and the unspoken prayers of our hearts audible to God. When I asked the people in our Wednesday Bible study why they pray, they told me we pray because we want to give thanks, to ask for help, to search for answers to life's "whys," to step away from the world to recharge our spiritual batteries, and to seek communion with God. All those are great answers, but in Hebrew the word for prayer "*lehitpalel*" means to judge or examine oneself. As we deepen our understanding of prayer, we begin to see that the practice of daily prayer reveals that we are all incomplete and finite creatures living a precarious existence – in fact, the word "*prayer*" in English comes from the Latin root "*precarious*," which indicates "uncertainty and *dependence on the will of another*." But praying in the Spirit also gets us to see ourselves, humanity, our world and our planet as God sees us: capable of great good and beauty.

Christian writer Philip Yancey wrote about how his own understanding of prayer shifted as he realized that praying is so much more than the human attempt to inform and change God's mind about what is happening to us or in the world. Yancey wrote in his book on prayer that praying became for him a spiritual practice bigger than "***a shopping list of requests to present to God***."<sup>xv</sup> Rather than thinking of prayer as a magical instrument that can remove the unknown, unpredictable, unpleasant, and unwanted elements from our lives,<sup>xvi</sup> Yancey now believes that prayer is a realignment of everything. It helps to correct our myopia regarding who we really are and what we really need and what we have to do to be faithful Christians and live in community. Prayer, Philip Yancey concluded, does not necessarily get us what we want. Prayer opens our hearts to what God wants.<sup>xvii</sup>

After spending all night praying on the mountain, Jesus knew that the community of apostles God wanted him to create would include people from different walks of life, varying opinions, conflicting political views, and distinct beliefs. Matthew was a tax-collector who worked for the Roman occupiers. Simon the Zealot was most likely an anti-Roman political activist. Judas Iscariot was a self-centered opportunist who betrayed Jesus for personal gain. In bringing that disparate group of apostles together, Jesus affirmed that the practice of prayer makes us see the truth of God's love for all of us. Our primary identity is not defined by politics but the biblical truth that every human being is one of God's beloved children.

Friends, the practice of daily prayer frees us from the truth-possessing mentality that is reducing people to opponents in our congregations and is tearing the Church apart. We need to put on the whole armor of God and pray in the Spirit at all times for the Church in America that we may all remember our call to be truth-pursuing followers of Christ above all else. As the Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel said so well, we need to remember that when we pray, we do not want to know God, but to be known to God. In prayer, we do not seek to form judgments about God or our neighbors, but to be judged by God. The practice of prayer empowers us not to make the world an object of our mind, but to let the world come to God's attention. When we pray, we endeavor to disclose ourselves to the Sustainer of all, rather than to enclose the world in ourselves.<sup>xviii</sup>

So dear church, let us be truth-pursuing followers of Christ who endeavor to disclose our true selves to the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of us all. Let us pray in the Spirit at all times for the unity of the Church in these challenging times of political division and polarization. As Philip Yancey suggested, “***pray like a salesman with his foot wedged in the door opening.***”<sup>xix</sup> Let us pray incessantly and keep our hearts and minds and church open to what God wants.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 7:5 [The Message].

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 5:41.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 5:38-40.

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 5:43-48

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 18:21-22.

<sup>vi</sup> Ephesians 4:32.

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 6:27.

<sup>viii</sup> Romans 12:18.

<sup>ix</sup> John 17:21a.

<sup>x</sup> Paul Hopkins in My UCC church's listening experiment with our evangelical neighbors, The Christian Century, 09 August 2023 [<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/my-ucc-church-s-listening-experiment-our-evangelical-neighbors>].

<sup>xi</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

<sup>xii</sup> By Adelle M. Banks in More Americans pray in their car than in a place of worship, survey finds, Religion News Service, 04 May 2023, [[https://religionnews.com/2023/05/04/more-americans-pray-in-their-car-than-in-a-place-of-worship-survey-finds/?fbclid=IwAR14-7s6e8vEX-7ReKAcA5Z38kmY8koVtTyZOZr\\_zYiGFOGu1xLflJbKO0s0](https://religionnews.com/2023/05/04/more-americans-pray-in-their-car-than-in-a-place-of-worship-survey-finds/?fbclid=IwAR14-7s6e8vEX-7ReKAcA5Z38kmY8koVtTyZOZr_zYiGFOGu1xLflJbKO0s0)].

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- <sup>xiii</sup> Philip Yancey in Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?, p. 29.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Philip Yancy quoting George Buttrick in Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?, p. 16.
- <sup>xv</sup> Philip Yancey in Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?, p. 29.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., p. 82.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Philip Yancey quoting Eugene Peterson in Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?, p. 109.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Based on Abraham Joshua Heschel's essay in Prayer Is Being Known by God, Plough Magazine, 11 October 2023 [[https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/prayer/prayer-is-being-known-by-god?fbclid=IwAR3n7dKroDG\\_iCa5PASPOoy\\_Ur9K4bazKHGeVRvcYvE8rEJBNpq5GrpFk0s](https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/prayer/prayer-is-being-known-by-god?fbclid=IwAR3n7dKroDG_iCa5PASPOoy_Ur9K4bazKHGeVRvcYvE8rEJBNpq5GrpFk0s)].
- <sup>xix</sup> Philip Yancey in Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?, p. 146.