

## “HELP! THANKS! WOW!”

*Script for Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, September 25, 2016*

### **Scripture Reading – Matthew 6:1-15 (NRSV)**

[And Jesus taught the disciples, saying,] “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”



*Jesus Kneeling in Prayer and Meditation, by Michael Jarvis Nelson*

Today marks the fourth and final installment in my sermon series on answering one of life's persistent questions: what's it all about? (*Eric plays: you do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around/that's what it's all about.*) Today's sermon is all about prayer, which I understand to be the practice of the presence of God, not just during Sunday worship, but throughout the other 167 hours of the week.

I've borrowed this morning's sermon title from the title of a recent book by Anne Lamott: *Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (Riverhead, 2012). Anne Lamott's definition of prayer is this: "our sometimes real selves trying to communicate" with whomever or whatever we understand as God. She elaborates on this definition:

"My belief is that when you're telling the truth, you're close to God. If you say to God, "I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don't like You at all right now, and I recoil from most people who believe in You," that might be the most honest thing you've ever said. If you told me you had said to God, "It is all hopeless, and I don't have a clue if You exist, but I could use a hand," it would almost bring tears to my eyes, tears of pride in you, for the courage it takes to get real—really real. It would make me want to sit next to you at the dinner table."<sup>1</sup>

The first essential prayer—Help—is simply saying to God, "I need help. I could use a hand. We need help. We could use a hand. I know someone who needs help. She could use a hand."

A story. Many years ago, my daughter Julia and I were marooned on Moose Island in Moosehead Lake in Maine. We had paddled our canoe to a wilderness campsite on the northwest shore of the island. During the night a cold front passed through, accompanied by wind and rain and thunder and lightning. In the morning, with a strong wind out of the northwest, there were whitecaps on the waves. It would have been too dangerous to put a canoe in the water, so we had to stay where were.

Sometime during the day, we heard the sound of an airplane. It wasn't coming to rescue us. It was a float plane that landed near Black Sand Island, a small island several hundred yards to the northwest of Moose Island. Two men got out of the float plane and stepped on the dock. The pilot then took off, perpendicular to the strong crosswinds, and the winds lifted the float plane like it was a child's toy and flipped it over and into the water, so that all we could see was the bottom of the upturned pontoons. I don't recall the exact words that I spoke aloud, but I know my words were addressed to God, and they had to do with helping the pilot of the overturned plane.

Much to my surprise, seemingly only a few seconds after my spontaneous prayer for help, there was the pilot, sitting atop one of the upside-down pontoons. His clothes didn't even look wet, at least from where Julia and I were standing.

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/21421044-help-thanks-wow-the-three-essential-prayers>.

The two guys he had dropped off at the island were furiously paddling their rowboat (without oarlocks) to rescue the pilot.

The winds were too strong for them to paddle the rowboat back to the island, so they paddled and drifted toward our campsite. Early that evening, when the winds had died down, all of us were rescued by Bill Orcutt, a ranger with the Maine Forest Service, who had heard about our plight and arrived at our campsite in his power boat.

I don't know **why** or **how** my prayer for help on that day was answered, I only know **that** it was answered. I can't say the same for most of the prayers for help that I have prayed. An end to violence in the Middle East. An end to racial bias and injustice here at home. I know I'm certainly not the only one praying for peace in the Middle East and racial justice in America. It's a fact of life that not all prayers for help get answered. Which does not mean that we should stop praying. In the words of one of our hymns, "teach me the patience of unanswered prayer."

Help. Thanks. Wow. According to Anne Lamott, the second essential prayer is "Thanks!" This is not a prayer that is in search of an answer. Even though in ordinary human communication, when someone says thank you to me, and I say "you're welcome" or "no problem," I don't expect God to say "you're welcome" when I say "thank you." Our prayers of thanksgiving serve to create a consistent attitude of gratitude in our hearts and minds. Gratitude for the amazing gift of life. Gratitude for the wonders of Planet Earth. Gratitude for the experience of forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace. In times of acute crisis, our prayers often begin with "Help!" But most of the time, our prayers ought to begin with "Thanks!"

"Gratitude," writes Anne Lamott, "begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior. It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides. It means that you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back."

And then there's the third essential prayer, in Anne Lamott's view: "Wow!" This one word articulates the human experience of wonder and mystery, of awe and amazement. Looking up at the night sky, for one thing. Even with the naked eye, we may be seeing light from a billion years ago. I've just finished reading a book on black holes and gravitational waves. I think the author has helped me move toward a limited understanding of these exotic phenomena, but I know I couldn't possibly explain her book to anyone else.

Thinking about thinking. Neuroscience is working to help us understand how we understand. How do our brains actually work? What's the role of neurons and neurotransmitters? How does an astrophysicist understand gravitational waves? How does my brain keep all my organs functioning, move my body, guide me when I'm talking or listening or reading or typing on a keyboard?

On the one hand, the “Wow!” prayer is not a prayer in search of an answer. It’s simply, and profoundly, an expression of awe and wonder. On the other hand, the “Wow!” prayer (or something similar) can be the beginning of a search for wisdom and understanding, for at least a tentative answer to the question, “What’s going on here?”

I appreciate Anne Lamott’s lighthearted, sometimes humorous approach to the serious matter of prayer. And by prayer I don’t just mean an intentional activity that we engage in for a few minutes each day. I mean by prayer a spiritual attitude that governs and informs our overall approach to life—work, family, parenthood, volunteer activities, recreation, solitude, community, including church community. I mean by prayer the practice of the presence of God.

When Jesus prayed, and when he taught his disciples to pray, he evidenced a spiritual attitude that governed and informed his overall approach to life. His was an attitude of humility and urgency and community. He was humble in his approach to God: hallowed be thy name. He was urgent in his petitions to God: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us our daily bread. Forgive us our sins. Save us in trying times. Rescue us from evil. Notice that the Lord’s Prayer is a an **us** prayer. Give **us**, forgive **us**, save **us**, rescue **us**. This prayer is not about my personal relationship with God, it’s about the relationship all of us have with God, all of us who follow Jesus. Give **us**, forgive **us**, save **us**, rescue **us**. It takes at least two or three people gathered together to pray this prayer, to practice in this way the presence of God.

I know can’t speak for Jesus, but I’m willing to hazard a guess that he might like Anne Lamott’s little book on prayer. In any case, I resonate with her insight that three essential forms of prayer are Help, Thanks, and Wow. Help us, God. We could use a hand. Thank you, God, for everything. Wow! Your works are amazing!