

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches his followers about prayer. Prayer is about transformation and change, for the better! Surely our world needs much prayer these days, but we need prayer for ourselves, and change starts with individual hearts. Our opening song (from the 1925 Book of American Negro Spirituals) made the point: “It’s me, it’s me O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer!” Jesus instructions are fairly simple and clear: Go to your room and shut the door, as you pray “in secret.” While there is a time for group prayer or group meditation, in this teaching, Jesus is advocating for solitary time, solitary prayer, a time to go deep into our own hearts and minds for healing or guidance. We know that Jesus went off to “lonely” places, or mountains, to experience the Spirit of God, as in last week’s reading of Jesus’ mountain top transfiguration.

For thoughts and advice on prayer, we turn also to poets, songwriters, and modern spiritual commentators. Let’s reflect a bit on some favorite songs about prayer. “In the Garden” is an often requested song. “I come to the garden alone” does reflect this truth of Jesus that much of our relationship with God or Spirit can and does happen “in secret,” a kind of inner comfort, an inner peace, an inner knowing. The song refers to Mary Magdalene going to Jesus tomb, by herself, early in the morning, “while the dew is still on the roses... and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known”... I used to think this could be a superior attitude of exclusive Christianity, but knowing how beloved the song is, and giving the benefit of the doubt, I now interpret the songwriter as meaning that every relationship with God or Jesus has is unique, particular to that person... something “none other has ever known.” I believe there can be no “cookie cutter” norm for how we talk about our relationship with God or Jesus, or Holy Spirit. It will always be highly personal, absolutely unique, and we do well to develop our own language and our own ways!

Another favorite hymn over the ages is “What a Friend we have in Jesus.” Again, I used to worry that this song could have exclusive overtones (we are the in-group, the saved, since we have found this close

friendship and personal relationship with the glorified Jesus, but now I see more universal and metaphorical understandings of the “way” the risen Christ can give comfort and healing. Just as God is “like” a father, or a mother, or gardner, so Jesus is also “like” a shepherd or like a fountain of living water, or like a friend... especially in the area of sympathy, not just a fair-weather friend. “Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share?” No earthly friend is ready to hear all our sorrows and weaknesses, though a good friend will sit and listen to many. This song points to the risen Christ, the eternal Christ spirit as One who will indeed share every sorrow, with understanding, and with victorious strength to keep going on.

There are so many good songs about prayer, like our prayer response this morning: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying.” The closing has a nice summary: “send us love, send us power, send us grace. Love is perhaps our greatest and perpetual need, power is so needed at weak or ill times in our lives, and ultimately we need this thing called grace... when we can’t get everything we need or want!

We remember when Paul asked for healing of the thorn in his side, and he “heard” a response from God that said “My grace is sufficient for you.” And this sentiment is echoed in the famous song “Spirit of God Descend Upon My Heart” when one verse ends with “Teach Me the patience of unanswered prayer.” I think I need not say more to underscore the idea that prayer is not as simplistic as requests to a Santa Claus, but has more to do with experiencing the PRESENCE of the divine spirit of God, as love, power, and grace.

We began our “Bible Exploration” class this past Friday, to start the journey of Lent. (You can find ways to attend by Zoom or in person in our weekly mailing.) We discussed this teaching on prayer, about going to your room and shutting the door! Most agreed that, at least in New England, we tend to be rather private about many things including prayer! Please don’t ask us to say table grace except maybe at Thanksgiving! But I do wonder if we really make the time for some solitary time with God, with Spirit. I know

that for many years, I often neglected pausing to spend quiet time with the Bible in a devotional way. Devotionals are so very helpful... a short passage, a short commentary, and time to pause and reflect in quietness. How is the “voice” of God going to “speak” to us if we fill our days with constant chatter or input from the never-ending digital information highway??? We remember the prophet Elijah talked about hearing God in the “still small voice.” Well, the divine voice will never be heard if competing with multiple screen distractions from TV to laptops, to iPads, to smart phones, now even to watches!

One of our Friday group members commented about gazing at the hues on the horizon, a sunset I think. Who has not paused in awe at the colors of a sunset? We are instantly humbled in reverence, and sometimes feel the concurrent “goosebumps!” I brought to the group the daily devotionals of Richard Rohr, and this week his topic was Nature, the Cosmos, and Connection. He tells of the theologian Howard Thurman who “from a very young age felt God’s real and loving Presence.” Howard Thurman remembers that he was awakened by his mother to go out and see a comet (Halley’s Comet). As a boy, he anxiously asked his mother, “What will happen to us if that thing falls out of the sky?” Calmly, serenely, she said to her son, “Nothing will happen to us Howard. God will take care of us.” Thurman reflects: “in that moment, something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me. As I look back on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet. It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fear and stilled my panic.” Imagine a boy, with an “inarticulate awareness, an awe!” ... feeling one with creation, an awe for the connectedness with all creation, and with the One who cares for all creation.

And now imagine an older man, 85 year-old Rev. Dr. James Forbes, a sought-after lively preacher, minister at Riverside Church in New York City for 18 years, whose eyes still sparkle when he speaks. He said in an interview recently that he has a favorite Bible verse that still rings true for

him, Romans 8:28: “All things work together for good for those who love God.” As a black preacher, born in 1935 he surely had many trials in his life. We all have inevitable sufferings in life, but **prayer** is a response of faith or “trust” that goodness can come out of all things, when our focus is God’s love and purpose. While we will not receive everything we ask for in prayer (such as perfect health and peace), there is always comfort, goodness, and love when we open our hearts continually to the Spirit.

Many people translate the biblical expression “fear of the Lord” as exactly what Howard Thurman described and what we experience when we pause to contemplate the beauty and power of Nature: *an awe or reverence for the Creator God*. Which reminds me of a poem written by Anna May Guyette on March 20, 2014, at about age 80. She went to be with her Maker this past week. Anna spent a lot of time in devotional solitude and expressed her strong faith through writing many poems. I put this one to music, and gave it the title “Silver Gems.” I love singing it, since it really is a **prayer of gratitude** to a Creator God, who cares for all of us and all creation. Anna always said, “I do the best I can with each day, and am grateful.” Join me in praying or singing this beautiful poem.

Silver Gems, by Anna May Guyette

*There are silver gems hidden in the snowflakes,
and gold glows in the sunsets which God makes!
On a pleasant summer day, bright azure in the sky,
butterflies of every color gaily flutter by!*

*There are diamonds in the raindrops, as they sparkle in the sun.
And what about a rainbow to show the storm is done?
Rich and poor together, God blesses everyone!*