

Redwoods Presbyterian Church

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Rev. Keenan Kelsey preaching

Help. Thanks. Wow!

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This is the title of Anne Lamott's treasure of a book about prayer. And since today we have come full cycle in our Season of Prayer, these pithy reminders seem fitting.

We've looked at how and when and even what to pray. We've discovered there is a huge and inclusive bandwidth, where there really are no rules, except perhaps honesty.

Prayer is talking to something or anything with which we seek union, even if we are bitter or insane or broken (In fact, writes Annie, these are probably the best possible conditions under which to pray.) Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen and do not have to get it together before we show up.

To pray is to know God's at first hand, without mediation, and to give thanks for the gift. To know that God's maternal hands hold one's life, like a baby.

It is reaching out to be heard, hoping to be found by a light and warmth and reassurance in the world, instead of darkness and cold and despair. It is a moment of conscious contact with a Power Greater than our wildest imagination, so loving and constant that the unfathomable mystery overwhelms us.

"These are prayers of Thanks," says Annie.

A lot of us religious types go around saying thank you to God when we find a good parking place or locate the housekeys or the wandering phone or finally get a good night's sleep.

And while that may be annoying to the people around us, it's important because if we are lucky, gratitude becomes a habit. Then we know how to say thanks for the difficulties as well.

To quote Annie, "Maybe you won't always go from being a rat to noticing that it is an E.E. Cummings morning out the window, but some days you will. You will go from being Doug or Wendy Whiner with your psychic diverticulitis, able to eat only macaroni and cheese, to remembering, 'I thank you God for most this amazing/Day. You splurge on a pint basket of figs or a pair of great socks. You begin to feel friendship with your flowering pear tree or in fact, you are able to use the word wonder again, even feel it, without despair that the NY literati or your atheist friends will find out and send you into exile.'

Which is seriously close to 'wow.' 'Wow' are prayers often offered with a gasp a sharp intake of breath. When we can't think of another way to capture the sight of shocking beauty or destruction. 'Wow' can click us into being fully present when were stunned by the sight of a birth or images of the World Trade Center falling, or the experience of Haleakala sunrise at dawn. 'Wow' is about having one's mind blown by the mesmerizing or the miraculous, the veins in a leaf, the gaze of the grasshopper.

'Wow' is the child seeing the ocean for the first time. 'Wow' is the teenagers Christmas car (secondhand, but still). 'Wow' is John Muir. Walt Whitman. Mary Oliver, saying that the sun was the best preacher that ever was.

'Wow' ensures that we are never dulled to wonder.

When we are stunned to the place beyond words, we're finally starting to get somewhere. It is so much more comfortable to think that we know what it all means, what to expect and how it all hangs together. 'Wow' takes our breath away and makes room for a new breath. That's why they call it breath-taking. It is a worthy prayer.

And then, 'Help.' Annie calls this the most basic and perhaps the most important prayer. It happens when it all seems hopeless, that things couldn't be worse. Everywhere you turn, lives and marriages and morals and governments are falling in pieces. So many friends have broken children. The planet does not seem long for this world. Repent! Oh wait, I mean help. Help.

Help me wail through this. Help! I don't pray for God to do this or that, or for God's specific outcomes. "Well, okay, maybe just a little" Annie adds. But mostly I pray help. Hold my friends, hold the world in Your light.

Help means, please fix the world, God, because alone, I can't. It also means help me follow Jesus.

The apostle Paul writes, in his letter to the Romans, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." He is not alone in that. It seems to be the human condition. And so, we ask for help, asking God to see God more clearly. Love God more dearly. Follow God more nearly Prayer, in any form, requires some humility, the kind that says, there is a God and it's not me. It requires an open heart. Jesus said when you are offering your prayer, your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Prayer of any kind also requires forgiveness. Martin Luther King Jr. explained this well: "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."

Forgiving isn't something you do for someone else. It's something you do for yourself. It's saying, 'You're not important enough to have a stranglehold on me.' It's saying, 'You don't get to trap me in the past. I am worthy of a future.' To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that prisoner was you."

Which brings me to the Parable we heard today. When you hear it, do you start longing to be the good soil? I do. I start worrying about how I can turn myself, and maybe you, into a well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized field for the sowing of God's love. I start worrying about how, as in the parable, the odds are three to one against us. Failure, or at least compassion burnout, are always lurking. The ways of the world are seductive. And then I start thinking anew how I might clean up my act. After all, my own confessions and concerns continue to pile up. And then I think about how you might clean up your act as well.

Jesus might have felt this message was important and purposeful, but it is a bit daunting to me. And more than a bit discouraging. Too close to those prayers of confession that are good for us, but uncomfortable.

So, I started thinking, what if, just maybe, this parable is less about the ground, less about our ability to grow the Word, but more about the sowing of the seeds. What if this is not about our own rocks and thorns and packed soils, but about the extravagance of a Sower who does not seem to be fazed by such concerns. Who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with bold abandon, feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks and picks his way through the thorns. Shouts hallelujahs at the good soil and just keeps on sowing, confident that there is enough seed to go around. And that when the harvest comes up at last, it will fill every barn to the rafters?

What if the focus is not on us and our shortfalls but on the generosity of our Maker, the prolific Sower who does not obsess about the conditions of the fields but just keeps on sowing with no caution, no judgment, no discouragement. This Sower seems willing to keep reaching into his seed bag for all eternity.

We would not do it that way of course. If we were in charge we would devise a more efficient operation, a neater, cleaner, more productive one that conserved energy and set boundaries and concentrated only on the good soil. But if this is a parable of the SOWER, then Jesus seems to be suggesting that there is another way to go about things, a way that is less concerned with productivity and more concerned with plentitude. Less concerned with cause and effect and more concerned with generosity and abundance.

What if the parable is calling us to be the Sower, and stop worrying so much about the fertile ground? What if we are being asked to sow seeds of justice and creativity and compassion and love, and leave the results, the fertile ground, to God?

What if this is the essence of prayer? Generosity and grace.

We can be extravagant prayers here at Redwoods. And we can be extravagant Sowers of God's love. Can we do this in all areas of our lives? In relationships and integrity and social justice causes, in self-help and self-care? Can we sow seeds of justice and love and forgiveness in patience and generosity and perseverance?

We all want to be the good fertile soil. But maybe first, we can be the Sower and take all those seeds — seeds of love and courage and faith and caring and giving— and strew them, extravagantly. Then, then, leave the rest to God.

Be the Sower, let God be the grower. May it be so. Amen.