

# What if Your Life Is the Prayer?

**Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan**

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**“W**hat do we do if this election leads to us losing our democracy?” a parishioner wrote to me. “How do we live out our UU values in this time?”

My thoughts went immediately to Dorothy Day who started *The Catholic Worker* and put her faith into action by creating communities where the homeless and the well-to-do lived and worshiped together. She has always been one of my heroes.

Dorothy’s description of prayer resonates with me. It is both the premise of this sermon and my answer to the parishioner who asked how we should respond in times like this, when our democracy is held in the perilous possibility of changing.

When referring to the person she was trying to support, Dorothy said this:

*Maybe I was praying for him then, in my own way. Does God have a set way of prayer, a way that He expects each of us to follow? I doubt it. I believe some people—lots of people—pray through the witness of their lives, through the work they do, the friendships they have, the love they offer people and receive from people. Since when are words the only acceptable form of prayer?*

What I was taught about prayer damaged, I would dare say severed, my connection to the God of my understanding. Perhaps the same is true for you, and if so, I hope you may find something of use in these words. If prayer works for you, please share with us so we can all learn how you use it in your life.

I was not raised in a very religious household. We went to church on Christmas Eve and Easter.

The ethos of my white Protestant upbringing was built upon a midwestern foundation in America, and English and Norwegian ancestry before that. My mother’s side of the family was steeped in entrepreneurship, while my father’s side found meaning in academia, business, and the law.

There was a role for church in my family, but it had more to do with social norms and tradition than with deep religious beliefs and doctrine.

Still, somehow, the meaning and way of prayer was taught to me. Prayer was what good people did. Prayer was a petition. It brought results. If you were good, your prayers were answered. If you were not good, well...

God was a man in the sky who answered prayers. If your prayers were not answered you must not be praying hard enough or acting good enough. God made all things right, turned evil upon itself, and saved those who were deserving.

These sentiments left me feeling very confused about God. I felt abandoned. If there was a God, why didn’t “he” answer my prayers? Was something wrong with me?

This is hard enough if you are praying for a certain birthday gift and it doesn’t come, but when you are praying for life-altering circumstances to change—people to stop hurting themselves with drugs, a loved one to be honest, a child to return unharmed from military service—and it doesn’t happen—these outcomes can feel devastating.

As a younger child I found solace and meaning in nature and with animals. I spent most of my time in the woods, creeks, and cornfields with cows, my dogs, and horses. I still find God there. And I find God in the space between people, where with authentic connection, magic happens. There are other ways that I pray, but I’ll save those for my God sermon. Today is about prayer.

I stopped praying on my knees by the age of nine and didn’t get on my knees again to pray for almost four decades. It’s still not my favorite way to pray. These days I’m more comfortable lying on my back in the water and looking at the sun or reaching my hands up to the “heavens” in my study as a form of thanksgiving.

There was a chasm of pain and confusion between my knowing that there *is* a loving energy in this Universe and the premise that God was supposed to answer my prayers.

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As a young adult, I turned to metaphysics, earth-based practices, and later Buddhism. I tucked my confusion about this God who is supposed to answer prayers to the side of my mind. I would occasionally take my confusions about prayer out, explore them, and quickly tuck them back out of sight, lest they cause me more pain.

I continued to live with this rift until I began dealing with addiction in my life. Then people told me that I'd "better" pray and turn my life over to the God of my understanding. That reignited my search for the God who answers prayers. Though the outcomes of the 12-step living have been transformative, they didn't solve my dilemma with prayer. Again, this was a painful place to be. You see, I felt God. I loved God. I needed God. I just didn't know what God was, exactly.

When I threw out the white guy who answers prayers, I was left with a vacuous whole.

Over time I came to realize that this God that I experience as presence, love, comfort, courage, compassion, and connection is real—for me. And this Spirit does receive prayers as does the Earth and the sky; it just doesn't move things around in life like a puppeteer.

When I pause, pray, and connect with this energy and ask for insight, insight comes, not always when I want it or on my timeline, but it comes. And then it's up to me to act upon it.

When I pray for others to act a certain way or for a certain outcome in any situation, I am acting with hubris. This kind of prayer is a huge setup for us to be frustrated, disappointed, or to know once again that "prayers don't work." Worst of all is that when we pray for something, for a specific outcome, we are at great risk of being separated from an ever-present presence that is around us, between us, and within us.

Please know this is just my experience. If you've had different experiences, I want to hear about them and I honor them!

I'll now share a few ways that I do pray.

Instead of praying for others to change or do what I want, I pray "bless them, change me." I ask to be shown the way of kindness

and compassion, which can look forgiving, or courageous action and ways to stand up for our UU values of justice, equity, and inclusion, all with love at the center.

*Bless them, change me* sometimes means allowing me to bless another and to be compassionate to their pain or ignorance, knowing that it can lead them to lash out or act in hurtful ways. Give me the courage to step away, make a new choice, or ask for help.

Another prayer I often pray is, "Help me to set aside everything I think I know." This is a prayer for the beginner's mind in Buddhism. I can be so sure I'm right that I don't even realize when I'm the obstacle in my own path.

*Help me to set aside everything that I think I know about...this situation, myself, the other person...for an open mind and a new experience.*

I also pray and *send loving kindness* to other people. This is one of my favorites. It feels good and is more helpful than worrying about others. When I find myself worrying about my children, I send them love. When I tell you all that I will pray for you, I mean it, and that's what I do. I sit in silence, usually but not always in the early hours of the morning, and I think of you and send you love, care, and peace. I pray that you feel the love that surrounds you and that you know peace.

I also pray for willingness. I can be stubborn! So I pray, "*Universal presence and source of wisdom, help me be willing to...*" fill in the blank with whatever value I am trying to uphold or live into.

I have two more common prayers, *thank you* or *Amen*, and *please*. *Thank you* is an exclamation of joy, gratitude, or delight. Sometimes that comes to you as a hug, a big smile, or funny emojis. *Amen* is a source of gratitude as well, an affirmation of what is. I often put thank you and Amen together. *Thank you, Amen*. I do this with you, the ocean, and my dog. We can all be great receivers of gratitude.

And my enduring prayer has always been and continues to be *please*. *Please* let me feel you, God that I don't understand. Allow me to surrender to the stillness, the peace, and the safety of no trying, no effort and trust, if only

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for a few moments, so I can return to what is at hand—a little kinder, gentler offering of what I have just received.

I no longer ask things of a God I don't believe in. I connect with the God of my understanding that I experience but can never fully comprehend, which is a presence of love, kindness, clarity, insight, and courage.

*Bless them, change me.*

*Help me to set aside what I think I know.*

*Hold this person in love and may they know peace.*

*Help me be willing to be: kind, courageous, honest, humble.*

*Thank you and Amen for all that is so glorious—this blade of grass, these open windows, this gathered body of people.*

*Please may I feel your presence and act from that place of wisdom.*

I pass no judgment on anyone's experience of prayer. All I hope is that whatever we do or don't do with prayer, it helps us to be more the people we want to be: more kind, patient, courageous, open, and loving.

I believe that when we do this day after day we live in such a way that our life, as Dorothy Day said, becomes the prayer. The blotched and botched, messy and incongruent, beautiful and real life that it is. My answer to the parishioner wondering what to do is: Act in the way aligned with your values, so that at the end of this life you may say, "My life has been the prayer."

Amen and blessed be.