

## Let My Prayer Rise Up

Luke 11:5-13

September 8, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

The very hardest skill I had to learn as I prepared for ministry was public prayer. You might think that leading public prayer would come easily to a person who is called to ministry, and perhaps for others it does, but not for me. You see, before I entered seminary, my prayers tended to be long periods of silent meditation – not asking God for anything or thanking God for anything, just sitting quietly and trying to be deeply receptive to whatever God wanted me to hear in that moment.

When I began my field education in a small church, however, people started asking me to lead them in prayer. They didn't want two minutes of silence. They wanted poetry. Or psalms. Or at least Isaiah. They wanted me to speak the words that would touch both their hearts and the moment that we were in together. And so, I began the painstaking process of learning to pray aloud. I memorized different forms of prayer. I memorized favorite passages of scripture. I learned to weave the words in the conversation around me into my prayers. I listened for the feelings that were in the room and tried to respond to them with scripture. I practiced. And practiced some more. Slowly, I got better at it. But still, sometimes the prayer flows and sometimes it doesn't. That is in the nature of prayer. It's just when YOU try to pray privately and you come up dry, only you and God know about it. When I do that, everybody hears it!

In seminary, I learned about a lot of different ways to pray, and I learned that some of them work for me and some do not. That is, some ways of praying find a natural place in my spirit in a particular moment. They make it easier for me to set aside whatever is occupying my mind and then to be centered and in touch with the divine. And other ways of praying don't work for me so well, even though they are a perfect fit for someone else.

There is *lectio divina*, for example – a way of studying and praying the scriptures – that is, speaking the scriptures as if they were my prayer in that moment. One of my seminary professors could be seen every day walking the halls, back and forth, with his Bible, praying the psalms. We knew not to interrupt him, and to give him wide berth as he paced. I prayed my way through the Gospel of John that semester. It took months! I learned a LOT about John, but this process always felt like work to me, not like prayer. *Lectio divina* is a beautiful form of prayer, but it is not MY form of prayer. Perhaps it is yours!

Early in my time in seminary, I bought this Tibetan singing bowl. They come with a wooden mallet. You can use it to strike the bowl, like a bell or gong, or you can run the mallet around the bowl to create a singing sound. Isn't that beautiful? I was seeing a spiritual director that year, who rang the prayer bowl to call us into a sacred space for our time together. I liked the sound of it, but the prayer bowl never made its way into my heart, and I would be happy to pass this bowl on to one of you, if you would like to experiment with this type of centering prayer.

During my second year in seminary, I was invited to participate in a prayer chain. I have shared with you in the past that there was an incident in which one of our seminary students received an anonymous, threatening, hate-filled note in his campus mailbox. Not surprisingly, he felt unsafe in the campus mail area after that, and so, the seminary students determined to reclaim that area as safe and sacred space by praying in 30-minute shifts for 24 hours. I had two shifts, back-to-back – one hour of prayer for the safety of our community. I sat on the floor across from the mailboxes and softly chanted the hymn Breathe on Us, Breath of God.

*Breathe on us, Breath of God, fill us with life anew, that we may love as you would love and do what you would do.  
Breathe on us, Breath of God ....*

Over and over again, for an hour, I sang. When my shift was over, the next student tapped me on the shoulder and I found that I had been in a such a deep, sacred place for that hour that it was difficult for me to return to regular, three-dimensional life. It was one of the most profound prayer experiences I have ever had. And I still sometimes chant hymns as prayers.

In Tibet, you may see prayer flags flying across the landscape. There is a picture of them on the front of your bulletin. These flags may simply be brightly colored squares of cloth, or they may bear woodcut prints, or they may have prayers written on them. They lift prayers for peace or other blessings, and those blessings are said to be carried on the wind to grace the land all around. Long after seminary, when I was a member of this church, approved for ordination, waiting for some church – any church – to call me so that I could begin ministry at last, I attended the New Hampshire Conference's Clergy Convocation. One of the activities there was to make a prayer flag. We were invited simply to let our deepest wish, our heart's desire, bubble up in us and then depict that on a piece of fabric.

I knew immediately that I had to draw a church – a church that would call me to ministry – but it felt a little scary to do that, because drawing that picture and hanging my flag with everyone else's meant making my prayer public, not just between me and God, but flying free to be seen by the whole world. I decided I had to do it anyway. This was, in fact, my deepest prayer, and I couldn't pretend otherwise. This is the flag I drew. Can you recognize the picture? Making this prayer flag was as deep a prayer experience for me as chanting had been a decade earlier.

In our scripture today, Jesus says that we don't have to keep our prayers hidden in our hearts. We are to pray persistently, to ask for what we want again and again, and to trust that God will give us good things, if only so that we will shut up about it. That gives us a lot of leeway, I think, to offer prayers for the future of this church, to dream big, to ask for what we most want, to share our heart's desire. And I invite all of you to pray daily for this church, in whatever form of prayer fits your heart. Perhaps you will pray as my grandmother always did, like a simple conversation with God. Perhaps you use meditation. Any way you pray is fine, so long as your heart is in it.

This morning after worship, we will all go to Gilpatric Hall to make prayer flags representing our prayers for the future of this church, and then we will hang them to remind ourselves of our heart's desires. I did this exercise with the Meredith church, when I served as interim there. One member drew a new furnace on her flag. The church's furnace was in desperate need of replacement, and that would cost an arm and a leg. The church hadn't yet figured out how to solve that problem. So, that was the prayer she drew – an accurate rendition of a new furnace. I was so impressed with her drawing! But it didn't really matter that she was able to draw the furnace accurately. What mattered was that her drawing expressed her prayer. That flag flew in the sanctuary beside prayers for love and for growth and for all the desires of the congregation's hearts. This member's prayer was answered. Within a few months, the Trustees had determined how to proceed with the furnace replacement, and the congregation and approved the plan. The following fall we worshiped in warmth.

Here is my prayer flag from that first Clergy Convocation. And this is how I would draw it today. Before, I prayed simply for a church – any church – to see me, to call me to ministry. This morning, I pray that this church will be filled always with love.

What is your deepest prayer for the future of this church? What is your heart's desire? Let it bubble up through the rest of this service. By the time we get to Gilpatric Hall, you will know what you want to draw. Jesus invites us to have confidence in our prayers, to utter them boldly and repeatedly, and to know that when we pray with all our hearts, God will respond with gifts that are for our good.

May God bless this church always.

Amen