

YOUR SPIRITUAL QUEST: THE WAY TO PRAY

Rev. Richard Maraj

Sunday, June 30, 2024

So this unscrupulous painter would always thin his paint to save expenses and make more money. And one day, a local church wanted their church painted. And he put a low bid in, and he got the job. And he, as usual, was thinning the paint with his turpentine. And so he was painting it and he thought everything was looking good. He was up on his scaffolding, and it was getting close to him being finished when he heard a thunderous clap of thunder and lightning happen. And it freaked him out and he ended up falling off of the scaffolding, landing near these gravestones. And then all the rain came thundering down and washed all of the paint off of the church.

And he was laying there in puddles of paint, and then he thought, "This is a sign from God," and he got on his knees and started praying, "God, please forgive me. Please forgive me. I'll do anything. Just tell me whatever it is. Just tell me, and I will do it."

And then another clap of thunder came, and the skies opened, and a booming voice said, "Repaint! Repaint, and thin no more." [Congregation laughs]

All right, bad joke, bad joke. But here's the question. How many people grew up with an image of God as a man in the sky or a king on the throne who would watch us and judge and even punish us? Anybody? You know, I think a lot of us grew up with that image, you know. Because we had this fear, you know, that God was making a list and checking it twice. He was going to find out who ... No! [Congregants laugh]

So let me ask you: So compare the image that you grew up with of God to the image that you have now. And how many people would say that your image is not only changed, but it's maybe changed for the better?

And then, so: How many people also received an image of yourself as a sinner or being flawed or bad or unworthy of God's grace? How many grew up with that kind of image? And so, again, compare that image of what you grew up with compared to the image you have of yourself today. And, again, how many people would say that it definitely changed and changed for the better?

At the beginning of the year in January, I started a 10 -week series called "Your Spiritual Quest: The Adventure of Your Life." Because whether we realize it or not, we're all on a spiritual quest. That our lives are a spiritual journey to the unfoldment of knowing the fullness -- and experiencing the fullness -- of the glory of God that is within us."

Paramahansa Yogananda said, "*The purpose of life is to know God.*" You know, the purpose of life that he would say is self-realization: the actualization and realization of the fullness of ourselves.

And so, you know, the fact is: whether you call it enlightenment or whether you call it the Christ consciousness; or oneness ... The fact is: that is the reason we're here. We're all on a spiritual journey. We tend, as human beings, to think the most real things in life are physical: the things that we can see and smell and taste and touch. But the truth is: the most powerful and real things about ourselves cannot be seen. It is spiritual.

In the book of Corinthians, it says, "*We look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are not seen, unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*" And the truth is: we are on a spiritual quest, and it is truly an inside job.

You know, the greatest thing to help us on a spiritual journey -- the greatest thing to help us feel a greater connection and oneness with God -- is the power of prayer. You know, the greatest thing that

helps us in our life and our spiritual journey is, specifically, our personal prayer practice. You know, prayer is the way that we unify our minds with the Mind of God. Prayer is the way we feel that deeper connection.

Martin Rutte had a line. He said, *"You have to do it for yourself, and you can't do it alone."* And the fact is: church is a beautiful and wonderful thing where we feel inspired; we feel this connection; where we celebrate the presence of God. But the truth is: it's the work we do when we're not here that makes the difference. It is the prayer practice that we do every day of our lives. As good as it is to be in community and small groups, those are wonderful. They help! But the work that makes the difference in deepening our connection and helps us on our spiritual request is how we utilize prayer.

Prayer is the way that we feel our connection to God. Prayer and meditation are the way that we grow and have greater levels of fulfillment.

And so, this morning, I want to look at the way to pray: the way that we, as spiritual beings, pray. And maybe look at some new ways and a new way for us to pray.

And so the three things I want to talk about that are a new way to pray is ... The first thing to start with in prayer is our **IDENTITY**. You know, to connect to our true identity and our true spiritual nature. I mean, I believe that the greatest thing that affects how we pray is the identity, and how we see ourselves.

Let me give you an example. So, if we believe that we are victims; that we're powerless; that we are miserable sinners unworthy of God's grace, how would you think that mindset and belief of ourselves would affect how we pray? I would suggest that way we would probably be begging and pleading and asking and trying to please God.

Now compare that to: if we see ourselves as spiritual beings; as children of God; and the Spirit of God lives in us, how do you think that mindset would pray? I would suggest that we'd be asking in faith and affirming and calling forth our good. I don't think we always realize that the way we identify ourselves -- the way that we see ourselves -- affects how we live; how we experience life; and, especially, the way we pray and the depth of connection that actually make.

You know, I've been reading a book and it is called, *How to Pray to God Without Talking to God*. And I thought it was kind of a cool title. And one of the things is: if you really look at it, the way most of us identify ourselves is, we identify ourselves from the dysfunction of our family and what religion teaches us to see ourselves as unworthy; to see ourselves as not enough; to see ourselves as less than. We tend to view ourselves from the worst in us rather than the best; from our lowest self rather than our highest self.

So, we identify ourselves just by our physical self: by our name; by our gender; by our age; by what we do or what we don't do; what we have and what we don't have, you know. And looking at ourselves with a more limited identity rather than an expanded identity. And we are so unaccustomed to identifying ourselves with the truth of who we are that we would rather say to someone, *"I am such a loser and a knucklehead,"* rather than saying, *"I am a beautiful child of God"* or *"I am a powerful spiritual being."* And that is how disconnected we are with our identity!

And so praying -- to be more effective and have a deeper connection with God -- we must begin to identify the highest nature of who we really are. And it is the most powerful way to begin a prayer -- is by elevating ourselves to the truth that we are ... that our nature is spiritual; that we are spiritual beings. Divine is our nature.

So my sister and I ... I've mentioned that she lives in Montreal. And every Friday at 7 o'clock, we have a FaceTime prayer session. You know, we do ... She leads us in some breathing exercises and we do some

meditations. And the thing I love about it is like: we get a mantra and we meditate on it for a while. And over time, I tell you, I just have been loving this. And here are the two mantras that we do. Each one will be, like, for five minutes. And the first one is, *"I am pure light, completely weightless and free."* I am pure light, completely weightless and free.

Let's say that together: [with congregation] *"I am pure light, completely weightless and free."* Take a deep breath and see how that feels in you.

One more time: [with congregation] *"I am pure light, completely weightless and free."* Take a deep breath.

And what I have found over time ... And the second one is: *"I am an eternal spirit, part of an eternal universe."*

[With congregation:] *"I am an eternal spirit, part of an eternal universe."* Take a deep breath again.

And one more time: [with congregation] *"I am an eternal spirit, part of an eternal universe."*

And what I have found in doing that, and spending five minutes with each of them, is: it pulls me away from the story I tell myself of who I am. It pulls me away from my name; my gender; my job; you know, from what I did or didn't do. And I begin to really connect with myself at a higher level. I begin to identify myself at a really high level, which I believe helps us have a greater connection as we begin our prayer. Not *"I'm a victim and God is here,"* but *"I am a spiritual being; I am an eternal spirit."* And I find it very powerful.

Another example I want to give is: in Charles Fillmore's *Invocation*, he says, *"I am now in the presence of pure Spirit."* *"I am now in the presence of pure being."* I'm sorry: *"I am now in the presence of pure Being."*

Let's say that together: [with congregation] *"I am now in the presence of pure Being."*

So taking it out from "out there" to right here. That I am in the presence of pure Being

Paul Hasselbeck, who's a dean and one of the teachers at Unity School, goes even further, from "I am in the presence of pure Being" to *"I am the presence of pure being."* That I am the life of God. I am the love of God. I am the wisdom of God.

"I am the life, love, and wisdom of God."

Let's say that together: [with congregation] *"I am the life, love, and wisdom of God."*

And what this process is doing is getting us to identify with our true nature: with our highest self, rather than our small self. Because that consciousness -- praying from that mindset -- absolutely impacts the quality and the depth of experience in connecting with God.

Let me give you another one. Remember a couple of months ago I switched the Prayer of Protection from the shorter one to this longer one. It's kind of clunky and a little odd and a little weird, but here's why. Because from *"The Light of God surrounds us"* to *"I am the Light."* *"The Love of God enfolds us; I am the Love. The Power of God protects us; I am the Power. The Presence of God watches over us; I am the Presence."*

Can you see it bringing it down to identify with our true nature and our true being? I mean, that is a powerful and amazing way to pray, is to begin to identify ourselves at the absolute truth of who we are: spiritual beings with a divine nature.

Eric Butterworth said, *"It doesn't matter what you pray for, it's where you pray from."* it is the consciousness. But when Jesus was asked, *"How should I pray?"* He said, *"When you pray, you should pray like this. Start: 'Our Father.'"*

So then he's saying: when you pray, bring your consciousness up to the truth. Bring your consciousness up to the nature of the amazing spiritual being that we are. And that begins to have a deeper connection; a deeper awareness in our experience of prayer. Identity.

And the second one is **SINCERITY**. Sincerity may not sound like such a good thing. Oh, I mean, it sounds like a good thing; it may not sound like such a powerful thing. But here's a number of times the Bible mentions how important sincerity is. *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart."* *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart."* *"Seek God with all your heart."* You know, in Jeremiah 29, it says, *"If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart."*

And what it is talking is about the importance and the power of being sincere; having a sincere desire for God; a sincere desire to unify our mind with the Mind of God; to have a soul connection.

You know, Larry Dossey did a lot of studies about prayer. And one of the things he said was, *"Any form of prayer works as long as it's sincere."* There is something about ... and that's about investing your heart in prayer.

Anybody ever pray rote? You know, you just kind of went through the words and stuff? And what this is saying is: there is a huge difference when you pray with a sincere heart; when you open your heart and you truly yearn, not for the gift but the giver. Not for just the payoff and the outcome of what you're looking for, but to actually experience and feel the presence and the power of God.

And when it says, *"Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you,"* you know, it is implying that it is sincerity that makes us make God a priority. It is sincerity of our hearts that desire God to be still and listen. It is from sincerity that we always turn to God.

You know, in the Beatitudes, it backs up sincerity a lot. It says, *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."* Because the more pure our heart and sincerity to seek God, the more we are likely to feel a deeper connection and a greater sense of oneness.

And the thing about *"Blessed are the pure in heart"* -- to seek God with all our heart -- is to realize that we cannot pray and feel a connection to God if we're holding a grudge with someone. Or we're having resentment or feeling guilt and shame within ourselves. We actually limit ourselves. And what we need to do is to make sure our hearts are pure.

And that's why in Psalm 51 there's a beautiful prayer. It says, *"Create in me a clean heart, O Lord."* That, before we pray, we need to ask: *"Is my heart open or closed? Is there anyone I'm leaving out of my heart?"* And to be able to do that work as a part of our prayer. Not just asking, but to make sure we're clean and open to have that deeper and greater connection with God. And so it's a powerful and important thing: having a sincere heart; praying with sincerity to sincerely connect with God.

And I would say we can ask for anything, but I think the most sincere prayer is to ask for whatever that goal, intention, or guidance is, and then say, *"God, this or something greater"* or *"Thy will be done. Whatever is for the highest and best."* To not just focus on the thing, but to focus on what is for the highest and best: what is God's will for this? Because that whole level of sincerity, to me, is the thing that absolutely deepens our connection and opens us as a greater channel for blessings and greater levels of joy.

And so identity. Sincerity.

And the third one is **CONSISTENCY**. I'm going to turn to the great philosopher, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson ... [congregants laugh] ... who said some brilliant things. And here's what he says. He said, *"Success is not always about greatness. It is about consistency. It is consistency -- and consistent hard work -- that leads to success, and then greatness will come."*

I would say I agree with that in every area of life. It is one thing to want something; it is another thing to consistently do the work that's necessary to make that thing happen. Jesus was absolutely consistent in his prayer: praying in the morning; praying midday; in the afternoon and evening. Consistently, he prayed.

You know, sometimes we wonder, *"Why do we pray?"* Well, the reason we pray isn't to change God; it's to change us. The reason we pray consistently is to open our mind; to increase our awareness; to expand our consciousness. And the more we pray consistently, the more we open ourselves to feel God's peace and clarity and wisdom and guidance. And it's consistency that expands and opens ourselves to feel the Divine within us.

How many people believe and have seen the power of prayer and used it in your life? And how many people would agree that you could pray more consistently and often than you currently do? And so, consistency is an important thing.

So the NBA Finals just happened and the Boston Celtics won. And I like their coach. He's been 50 years since somebody as young as him -- he's actually 35 -- won. And he's got a lot of -- for being young -- he's got a lot of wisdom. And somebody said to him, *"So explain why you won and how this process happened."* He said, *"The reason is because we understand it's a process. And the second one is: we're committed to the process."*

And the fact is: prayer is a practice; it's an experience; and it is a process. That there will be some good days and some not-so-good days. Some days we feel connected; some days we don't. But we need to keep consistent with it. We need to keep consistent.

Linda Martella-Whitsett, who wrote the book *How to Pray Without Talking to God*, says that the most important prayer is that we hold our identity and keep sincere, even in the times when life isn't looking great. When the situations and the appearance are tough, it is the spiritual work and the consistency we do in those moments -- of holding our heart and our attention and turning to God in prayer -- that actually opens a space for breakthroughs; for insights; for quantum leaps. But we've got to keep doing the work. You've got to keep doing the work! It's the consistency of prayer that is vital and important.

How many people here play golf? Anybody play golf? And do you know that 26 million Americans play golf? And the golf industry is \$27 billion a year! We love ourselves some golf! So how many people who have played golf would say that golf is hard and difficult and frustrating? And so much so ... anybody ever thrown their ... [laughs with congregants] ... Or sworn? Anybody realize that golf is frustrating and annoying and hard? Anybody?

So, I was playing golf at Encanto a number of years ago. And I swung at the ball; I shanked it, and it went way left. And I said something very colorful. [Congregants laugh] And there were two words. The first word was *"Holy."* [Congregants laugh] The second word wasn't so holy. [Congregants laugh] And so, I hit it. And then I hear the last three words I want to hear when I say something like that in public: *"Hi, Rev. Maraj!"* [Laughs with congregants]

So, we know it can be hard! But you know, for golfers, as hard as it is, you know what? They keep playing. They keep trying. They keep at it. And I would say the same thing for meditation. Meditation isn't easy. How many people have ever meditated for five minutes and your mind wandered for four-and-a-half? [Congregants laugh] Anybody have that experience? It's not easy! But just like golf, it's a part of the

game. Just like golf, you've got to keep bringing your mind back; keep bringing it back; keep bringing it back.

You know, Buddha once said, *"It doesn't matter how many times you forget; it's how many times you remember."* It does not matter how many times your mind wanders; it's how many times you bring it back. It doesn't matter how many times you forget to pray; it's how many times you remember to pray. To keep at it; keep at it; keep at it. Because it's the consistency that opens a path for greater connection and greater breakthroughs.

Some of the things that I do to help myself with consistency is that I will sometimes just take a deep breath. [Breathes deeply] And it's, one, because I'm busy doing something. If I'm at a desk or in a meeting or something, I will find little ways to meditate for one minute; you know, for two or three breaths. You know, sitting at my desk. I mean, sometimes I will mute it when I'm watching a TV commercial and then I'll meditate during that experience.

I don't just wait for the longer periods that I do it. Because it really helps me stay more consistent. It helps me remember more, so I don't forget to pray or don't pray every single day.

And every one of us has to support ourselves in finding ways to keep ourselves consistent with prayer: consistently going back; consistently opening our hearts; consistently connecting and turning to Spirit. You know, it's that consistency that's important.

I saw a quote once and it said, *"The only thing I don't like about life is that it's just so daily."* [Congregants laugh] And it's daily! That's the commitment to our spiritual practice. We eat every day. You know, we sleep every day. And we need to pray every day. It needs to be consistent, consistent, consistent.

You know, sometimes we think we're too busy. But Deepak Chopra said, *"If you're too busy to pray once a day, pray twice a day."* [Congregants laugh] And that's how important it is. Prayer is an ongoing process. It is a practice; it is an experience; it is a process. And if we want to have a deeper spiritual connection -- we want to achieve self-realization -- prayer is really at the heart of it. You know, and moving ourselves from God "out there" ... to being in the presence of God ... to God being within us and around us ... to expressing as God. Identifying, you know, as a spiritual being.

And so here are the three ways again. **IDENTITY**: connect with your true identity, your spiritual nature. *"I am the Life, Love and Wisdom of God."*

Let's say it again: [with congregation] *"I am the Life, Love and Wisdom of God."*

"I am an eternal spirit, part of an eternal universe."

Together: [with congregation] *"I am an eternal spirit, part of an eternal universe."*

And then **SINCERITY**. Your heart, you know; is it open? And is there anywhere that you need to ask God, *"Create a clean heart in me, Lord?"* Because that's what opens us to have a deeper experience and connection to Spirit.

And, finally, it's **CONSISTENCY**. It is the daily work. And I call it -- instead of getting mad when your mind wanders -- have what I call "patient persistence." Just, it's a part of the game; bring it back. It's part of the game; bring it back. Just keep going; keep the consistency.

You know, our spiritual quest is to unify our mind with the Mind of God. And the best way to support ourselves in that practice -- the best way to keep things going -- is to try a new way to pray.

God bless you all!