

**Keynote address by Bishop Margaret G. Payne**  
**“A Second Helping of Feed the Woman”**  
**Saturday, Sept. 19, 2009**  
**Trinity Lutheran Church, Worcester, Mass.**

The first prayer that I ever learned and prayed daily was this one:

Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep  
When in the morning light I wake  
Help me the path of love to take  
And keep the same for thy dear sake.  
God bless Margaret and help her to be a good little girl,  
And God bless Mother and Daddy and all those I love. Amen.

When I asked my mother later in life why she hadn't taught me the better known:

If I should die before I wake  
I pray the Lord my soul to take ...

... she said that she wanted me to focus more on being a good little girl every day than on the fact that God would love me and accept my soul no matter what I did.

I suppose that was the immigrant German Lutheran version of grace – we know we aren't made righteous by the good things we do, but “anything worth doing is worth doing well”, so we should work hard at a life of love even though it's our faith that saves us. It was the first conscious step in my life of prayer – my connection with a God that I have always suspected offers a bit more grace than my mother did.

Actually it was my father, my Abba, who was the giver of grace in our household, so I was blessed with the two most important parts of the foundation of a life of faith and prayer – discipline in my training and grace in the air all around me.

I have thought a lot about what to say this morning, and the problem has not been that I can't think of what to say, but that the topic is so huge that it's hard to choose what to say – the ways to talk about prayer are infinite.

During my workshops, we will be talking about the idea that there are different kinds of spirituality and different ways of praying – and they are all fine with God. So if you are not signed up to go to my workshops – that's OK – you don't need to feel guilty or think that you are missing anything – just use your workshop time to nourish your spirit and explore different ways to stay in touch with God.

But during this time together now, I would like to share with you some steps in my own journey in a life of prayer, some thoughts and quotations, and some of my favorite poems and prayers. I'm going to group these into three categories:

- 1) the mystery of the intimacy of prayer
- 2) the mystery of God as totally other
- 3) our call to live in prayer as a way to connect those two mysteries

The mystery of the intimacy of prayer – it begins at the bedside of a child. It is critically important to give children the experience and vocabulary of both worship and prayer because those are the tools that they can use to get to know God in deeper ways than the world can provide. But we also need to realize as adults that God invites us into an intimate relationship – with all of our human limitations and self-centeredness –we can be totally honest with God since we are already totally known. It's foolish to pretend that we are better than we are – God already has our number.

This has led me to recognize a certain kind of prayer that is unavoidable – and even pleasurable to God – I call it a “hockey puck prayer”.

I became aware of this kind of prayer when I was the mother of the most sensitive six year old boy in the history of the world who had just been made the goalie on his pee-wee ice hockey team. I had never witnessed such human agony as what he experienced every time the puck got past him into the net and the other team scored a goal. So as I stood, game after losing game, and in the ice rink I would pray: oh please dear God, don't let the puck go into the goal, don't let the puck go into the goal.....And then one day I saw another mother standing on the other side of the rink whose face clearly indicated that she was praying: oh dear God please let that puck to into the goal, please let that puck go into the goal. Dueling prayers -- they're all over the planet, about things as small as whether there is rain for the hay or sun for the picnic, and as big as who wins a war.

And after some reflection, I decided that we absolutely HAVE to pray that intimate, selfish kind of prayer in our lives as a way of getting deeper into our prayer life. God already knows what we want – small and big – and one way to stay in touch is to keep up a steady conversation about our lives – prayer-talk about our hope for a new job as well as the healing of a friend from cancer, about our hope for a new car as well as world peace.

Although it is always God who beckons us into prayer, and prayer itself is a gift of grace, we can do our part by persevering in prayer every day as we would in any relationship that is important to us.

St. Teresa of Avila, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century defined prayer this way: prayer, in my opinion, is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with God, who we know loves us.

She meant that it is more than simply a conversation – it is an encounter, and she would define it as an intimate friendship that can develop only because God loves us and knows us intimately, and longs for our response. The words of prayer aren't the content of prayer – love is the content of prayer, flowing in both directions with honesty, trust and joy.

Here is one of my very favorite prayers, that I am referring to more and more as the years go by. It is said that it was written by a mother superior in a convent, and it echoes with both the intimacy and the sense of humor that I believe that all people who are truly close to God demonstrate.

Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself that I am growing older....  
Keep me from getting talkative, and particularly from the fatal habit  
of thinking that I must say something on every subject  
and every occasion.

Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs.  
Keep my mind from the recital of endless details,  
give me wings to come to the point.

I ask for grace enough to listen to tales of others' pains;  
Help me to endure them with patience.

But seal my lips on my own aches and pains – they are increasing,  
and the love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter  
as the years go by.

Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally it is possible  
that I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet. I do not want to be a saint –  
some of them are so hard to live with,  
but a sour old woman is one of the crowning works of the devil.

Make me thoughtful, but not moody; helpful, but not bossy.  
With my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all,  
but Thou knowest Lord, that I want a few friends at the end.

(Passed down through the generations as “Mother Superior's Prayer”)

The mystery of God as totally other ...

Since we are Christian, we have Jesus, God incarnated, as the link between the unimaginable God and the God who entered humanity to be with us.

Daily intimacy in prayer is one important thread in our lives, but we also need to remember that God is beyond all of our human categories and understandings – God is God, alive before time, within all time and beyond time. One of the dangers that one writer has identified is that we might come to think of God as a kind of “cosmic bellhop” – the one to whom we direct all of our wishes and desires.

There has to be a part of prayer that gives itself over regularly to awe, wonder, and praise. So we must constantly be opening ourselves to the deepest mystery of a transcendent being beyond us. That means that we must be willing to move beyond even our most precious symbols for God – as friend, father, rock, mother – all of these are just crutches to help us limp toward a deeper unity with the being who is beyond all being. We can use them as long as we need to use them – perhaps throughout our entire lives – but we should always remember that God is neither male nor female, God is Other.

For this kind of praying, the best tools are silence and items for meditation that are beyond human category – a candle, symbols, chanting, icons, the walk of a labyrinth, centering prayer – all of those things that help us to let go of our human need for control and understanding.

Someone once wrote that being a human trying to imagine God is like being an ant trying to imagine a ballerina. We can't ever do it – human beings simply cannot do more than touch the mystery of God and seek to live in ways that reflect the kind of love that we have learned through Jesus Christ.

This concept is captured in the title and content one of the classics of Christian mysticism: *The Cloud of Unknowing*. That deep yet undefinable understanding of God is far beyond what I have ever experienced, though more and more I am discovering the discipline of contemplative prayer as rich and rewarding.

For many years, and still today, my primary discipline has been to spend at least a half hour in prayer, usually in the mornings, with additional time for study or scripture reading or journaling. I don't always succeed in taking that time, and there are times when I take more. Luther used to say that he needed at least an hour of prayer every morning, and if the day was going to be especially busy, he needed two or three hours.

I confess my biggest weakness here – too often I allow my hurry to get things done to cut my prayer time shorter than it should be – but I'm working on that. And the other two things that I am working on are these: the continuation of prayer throughout the day, and a time set aside in the evening to rummage back in the day that has just passed, and hunt for the places where God and love have appeared – the times when I have been instrumental in that happening, and the times when I stood in the way. And feel the mystery of the presence of God and the mystery of God's forgiveness of my shortcomings.

It seems to me that a daily effort to allow our hearts to drift into a willingness to let go of our agendas, and requests and fears, and just (as another author has said) "waste time with God" – this is perhaps the best way to get in tune with the otherness of God, to grasp more and more fully that God's love and power are more than we can ever understand.

I want to share with you now not a prayer, but a poem, that for me expresses just a little bit of this holy mystery of love beyond us – the mystery that we should hold in wonder

even as we make our best efforts to do things that please God and eagerly respond to God's love for us. It does this in the description of a little boy, making a gift for his mother.

From ***The Lanyard*** by Billy Collins (from *The Trouble with Poetry, and other poems*, Random House, New York)

.....I sat at a workbench at a camp  
By a deep Adirondack lake  
Learning how to braid thin plastic strips  
Into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard  
Or wear one, if that's what you did with them,  
But that did not keep me from crossing  
Strand over strand again and again  
Until I had made a boxy  
Red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,  
And I gave her a lanyard.  
She nursed me in many a sickroom,  
Lifted teaspoons of medicine to my lips,  
Set cold face-cloths on my forehead,  
And then led me out into the airy light

And taught me to walk and swim,  
And I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.  
Here are thousands of meals, she said,  
And here is clothing and a good education.  
And here is your lanyard, I replied,  
Which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,  
Strong legs, bones and teeth,  
And two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,  
And her, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.  
And here, I wish to say to her now,  
Is a smaller gift – not the archaic truth

That you can never repay your mother,  
But the rueful admission that when she took  
The two-tone lanyard from my hands,  
I was as sure as a boy could be  
That this useless, worthless thing I wove  
Out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

And lastly – the call to live in prayer as a way to connect those two mysteries. When we intentionally choose prayer as a daily activity, and think about weaving it through our days not only in words, but in thoughts, intentions, actions.....work and play, sadness and celebrating, morning and night, then we are laying bare our hearts for God to touch in a thousand different ways. And God will do that, in ways that we can never imagine until they happen to us – and they will be sometimes expected and sometimes totally surprising.

How shall we pray? That is what we are asking today, and there are more ways than any one person can accomplish. So we don't need to think of it as a challenge or one more thing that we have to do – we can think of it more like an opportunity to fall more and more deeply in love.

Probably the best way to lay the foundation for a life of prayer is by living in intentional gratitude for life each day. The bible tells us to be thankful in all circumstances – that's a hard thing to do if you really think about it. That means not only little things like stubbed toes, missed planes, failed diets and arthritis, but also illness and loss and disappointment. And yet ... it is the foundation for joy.

A famous Christian mystic once said that if the only prayer you pray is “thank you” – it's enough. And Anne LaMott – my favorite funny and irreverent Christian writer – says that her prayer every morning is: “please, please, please” her prayer every evening is: “thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Here's a poem from Mary Oliver entitled: “Praying”

It doesn't have to be the blue iris, it could be weeds in a vacant lot  
or a few small stones; just pay attention,  
then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate; this isn't a  
contest, but a doorway into thanks,  
and a silence in which another voice may speak.

The life of prayer is such a rich life – it is so sad when people do not make the time or value the opportunity to simply rest in prayer. Maybe every age has had its challenges, but I think that the distractions in this age are more intense than ever – both in the technology of constant human information and communication, and the turmoil that comes as a result of busy lives and wounded relationships. We are distracted in so many ways and we allow those things to crowd out our time with God. But we cannot let that discourage us. The devil may be in the distractions, but God is also there, ready – as always – to use everything that we have and are to draw us closer into relationship.

Here is a thought about prayer that a colleague sent to me – it's a reminder about how real prayer is as a relationship with God – that includes all of our humanity.

You can't say about praying: “Practice makes perfect; gradually you will get to be really good, so be patient with the messiness of your beginner's results. In time you will be proud of what you achieve.” Instead, the advice might go something like this: “Honey,

prayer is God's way of getting you to meet the cast of characters you call your distractions. God knows we spend a lot of time disowning them and pretending that we don't know them. They are family. Prayer will always be messy, because they are. Those distractions are our mess ... so prayer is our rendezvous with them and God is present to introduce us. Maybe what you call your distractions are really the main event."

Prayer is not a rare treasure, it is a life-style. It is not a skill to be perfected, it is a relationship to be cherished. And it is also a way to understand how God longs for us to connect to the world around us.

One of my favorite writers is Joan Chittister, a religious of the Benedictine order, who writes simply and compellingly about the spiritual disciplines in her life of faith. Here is one excerpt about prayer:

... prayer can be an easy substitute for real spirituality ... it is certainly possible to pray without having a spirituality at all. There are business people of our generation, for instance, who go to prayer breakfasts regularly and then raise interest rates on Third World debts and increase mortgage rates on housing loans and refuse aid to farmers but easily advance money to munitions companies. There are people who go to prayer groups and never give a cent to the poor. And there are monastics who go to chapel and forget that the function of reading the gospel is to become a gospel person, not an ecclesiastical hothouse plant.

(From "Wisdom Distilled from The Daily," Harper and Row, San Francisco)

Today is a day when you will be able to be fed by all kinds of prayer – with hearts and hands and minds and imaginations and worship – and I pray that you will be blessed and will bless others with your presence.

As an ending to this time that we have had together, I would like to share with you a prayer – the one that if someone asked me for my favorite prayer – this is the one I would tell them. It was in the green worship book, and now is in the new red (cranberry?) one – along with many other prayers, including all the psalms – you should really check it out as a good prayer resource.

Anyway – this is a prayer that has sustained me in change throughout my life, that helped to bring me to New England, and that has continued to be the words that I often pray when I cannot think of any other words – in hopeful times and difficult times:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.