

**“Like Crying Out Unto Like”
a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
Williamsburg, VA**

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How many of you have engaged in texting in church? How many of you didn't know that “text” is a verb now? WELL! Three months ago today, in the Morning Star Methodist Church in Fallon, Missouri, some teenagers sat in the sanctuary transmitting text message questions using their cellphone keypads. The messages were received on the church's cell phone by its director of worship, who sat in the sanctuary control booth and forwarded some of them to the minister for response during his sermon -- via his laptop, which was positioned next to him in the pulpit. One teen asked, “I'm wondering about people I don't care to bump into in heaven. Will strained relationships here be awkward there too?” The minister called this real-time texting practice a matter of “staying true to our mission to meet people where they are.”

The other end of the worship spectrum is represented by the reaction in my home church in Oakland when an interim minister started making changes to the worship service. Muttering about “tampering with the liturgy” began to bubble up around the church. The minister must have felt like he had fallen through a time warp and into the clutches of an angry mob of medieval Catholic bishops.

What is the right place for us on the various continuums of worship design? To find out, we need to ask, what is it in us that our worship service needs to touch and move in order to connect us more closely with the holy. The point of connecting is to have an experience of wholeness. So what must be touched and moved can be nothing less than our whole selves: physiology, intellect, emotion, character, and even the transpersonal deep self; all the facets of our temperaments – introspective and gregarious, contemplative and energetically expressive, aesthetic and practical.

These needs are not distributed in neat proportions among those who worship here. To create worship that is consistently nourishing for everyone, what should we be looking or listening for in the many choices we have? The metaphor I want to use to answer this question is resonance. I believe that deep within every human being there is something that senses its own likeness to the holy and vibrates like a tuning fork in its presence. This is the meaning of Meister Eckhart's explosive declaration of faith. Preaching to his flock, the medieval Catholic mystic shocked the church hierarchy by saying to them “You truly are the hidden God in the ground of the soul, where God's ground and the soul's ground are one ground.”

The holy is always and everywhere present – including within us. So resonance with it is really a matter of removing whatever blocks that natural recognition of likeness. This is what we strive for in worship. If we pay attention to what engenders resonance and what doesn't, we can bring those insights into designing our worship.

This kind of paying attention leads to worship that is profound, rather than being merely a stitched together compromise of competing styles and tastes, or some kind of spiritual salad bar where you can pick your way through the ingredients that do and don't suit your palate.

Our quest for resonance should be taken to every element of our liturgical practice – from opening and closing rituals to readings, testimony, sermons, music, and right on down the line. This morning, I want to focus on a practice that hasn't been a significant part of our liturgy but holds great promise: prayer. I want to suggest that one question about prayer stands out above all others. If we get clear about this one, I believe the rest will fall into place. That question is, what should we be praying for?

I think we can begin by putting aside prayers for things that look like a Christmas list – praying for a job promotion, good grades, a new car, what-have-you. The problem with those prayers is not that they ask for too much, but rather, that they ask for far too little. So we might rephrase the question as “what is grand enough to warrant praying for?” However expressed, the answer boils down to one word: life. Not in the sense of merely persisting biologically, but rather, in the sense of the largest possible spiritual experience.

We've talked before about what it means to be open to the largest possible spiritual experience. This calls for the open-heartedness of forgiveness, of compassion for self and others, of willingness to take big risks in life, of seeking out surprise instead of insulating oneself from it. It calls for an appreciation of the value of pain as well as pleasure, grief and loss as well happiness and success. Any spiritual practice that engenders this openness is a good one.

What stands between us and this largest possible spiritual experience? This and only this: whatever we have done or has been done to us to keep our own hearts closed. When you pray for the largest possible life, and you really mean it, you are speaking from a heart that has opened wide.

An open-hearted spiritual life is not something that God dispenses to worthy pleaders. God does not stand between us and this gift. I say, God has always been giving this gift, is giving it, and will always be giving it. This is so because God is eternal, which means outside of time altogether. But you don't have to accept my statement in order to pray. You can broadcast your prayer to the wide blue sky or, as an old Unitarian joke goes, to whom it may concern. Seriously. Prayer requires only that your plea be directed both inwardly and outwardly, because it is a declaration of willingness to become whole. It is an invitation to everyone and everything with which you belong but feel cut off from: other people, nature, the given world, your own deep self, and God or whatever energy or presence beyond the finite you might resonate with. It is an invitation to reunion.

Speaking in his usual elliptical way, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Ask, and it will be given unto to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. In prayer, we ask, search for, and knock on the door of other people, nature, the given world, God, and our own deep selves. What we seek is not awarded to us by someone else. It is the sincerity of the knock that opens the door, of the ask that enables us to receive what we already have.

This mutual receiving, finding, and being received – which are the reunion that the largest possible spiritual life is about – require giving up many lesser things. Haven't all the prophetic voices down through history been speaking to us mostly about what we need to give up, rather than what we need to get? It's a long list. At the top of it is a life of pretending you're going to live forever, even as you intellectually acknowledge that you won't. If you are not prepared to give that up, you are not in a position to ask for the largest possible life.

A life that includes death is larger than one that banishes it. These two lives are mutually exclusive. You have to choose. Of course you can't actually banish death from your physical existence. But you definitely can banish it from your spiritual life, drive it from your consciousness. And we all do, to one degree or another. A life from which death is banished is just the most extreme example of many kinds of limited lives that must be given up to have the largest possible spiritual life. Other examples are a life of pleasure that banishes pain, of happiness that banishes sorrow, of tranquility that banishes turmoil, and on and on. These things must be relinquished because the heart is too simple to allow us to hang onto them. It has one valve that is either opening or shutting—moving toward receiving everything or toward receiving nothing, toward spiritual life or spiritual death. It is wonderfully incapable of selectivity – a brilliant design.

So receiving the largest possible life requires much of us. But we don't have to meet any such requirements in order to pray. Prayer is what begins to open our hearts, not something we do after we have become open-hearted. We can start by praying for strength to give up what must be given up. Prayer is being a willing participant in calling forth that resonance that enables one heart to connect with another, that makes the whole world kin.

This may sound strange, but prayer does not depend on whether you believe in God. It is a matter of whether you are willing to be open to the possibility of relatedness, of connection, of wholeness, of moving toward the holy, of reunion with God in this life – even a god you're far from sure about or outright skeptical of. You don't even have to be open to these possibilities -- just willing to be open to them. This is all that prayer requires.

Of course, to pray in church requires the additional willingness to join with others in this spiritual practice. I know some of you are thinking, why do we have to do that? One answer I could give you is that you already do. Did you know that over a hundred of the hymns in our hymnal are cast in the prayerful form of direct address to a deity? What other name should be given to what you were doing this morning when you sang "Spirit of life, come unto me?" It's interesting to ponder why it might feel one way to sing a prayer and another way just to say it. In any event, we don't have to pray in worship. But why wouldn't we if it's a valuable spiritual practice?

If you know Connie at all, you know she's serious about her spiritual life. She says prayer enlarges that life. You may say, that isn't logical, or, there's no logical basis to think it would do that for you. But, scandalous as it may sound, understanding is the booby prize. For many people, praying is difficult. That includes me, by the way. I am so unevolved. Sitting by ourselves, we can easily fall into thinking we are alone in our spiritual struggles. Communal

prayer is a form of mutual support. Kind of like the blossoming of menorahs in windows all over Billings, Montana in this morning's story.

If our strongly individualistic temperament inclines us toward thinking of prayer as a private matter, it may seem too conformist to have one person lead a prayer in worship, expecting others to adopt her words as their words. But if you accept my suggestion that the only thing really worth praying for is the largest possible spiritual life, is it unrealistic then to think that any one of us could express that value? Is there really anyone here who is against that value? It's really not a matter of wording, is it? To insist that it is would treat our liturgy as more a matter of style and taste than fundamental values, wouldn't it?

Communal prayer also symbolically affirms that the opening of human hearts is a universal challenge. When we talk about "heart" we're really talking about deep self. In talking about the downward inward journey on November 9, I described the deep self to you as transpersonal and nonspecific. Prayer is calling forth that part of us. Ministers usually lead prayer in church, but maybe the universalizing symbolism of this practice would ring truer if everyone took a turn at leading it. Prayer doesn't require professional training. We don't need to make ourselves or our prayer presentable to God or one another. "Sincere" trumps "presentable" every time.

Prayer is the crying out of like unto like, giving voice to spiritual resonance. Everyone can sing in this choir. Enlarging your voice might enlarge your spiritual life. Are you willing to be open to the possibility?

Amen.