

Let It Be a Prayer
Rev. Lisa Doege
Oct. 18, 2020
Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Someone once told me they wanted a habit. This was someone I had only just met, and one of few things I knew about them was that they were Catholic, so I was a bit startled at first, wondering what sort of revelation was forthcoming. But it turns out my automatic association of *Catholic* plus *habit* with *nun* or *religious vocation* had misled me. This person had come to know that they wanted what I would call a *spiritual practice* or *discipline*, not a *habit*. They continued on: “I’ve always wanted a habit so I decided that when I hear a siren, I’ll pray. Because a siren, of any kind, means someone is in danger.”

That seemed to me a profoundly simple and almost sure-fire way adding spiritual practice to daily life. No need to set aside a chunk of time or prepare a meditation space. The sirens themselves would serve as the call to prayer and where this person was would be the meditation space. “Bless the ones in peril, O God, and the ones attending them. Grant them protection and safety. Wrap them in Your loving care and deliver them once again into wholeness and the embrace of their loved ones. Amen.”

This past summer, remembering that conversation and remembering the story from Ram Dass we heard a few minutes ago, I vowed to make my reaction upon seeing political yard signs a spiritual disciple. Instead of swearing silently or aloud, instead of seething inwardly or questioning the intelligence, sanity and moral character of the people who put up the signs, I would pray for them. Not condescension--*oh, bless their heart!* Nor a prayer to change their minds or hearts. But a prayer *for* them. A blessing. A prayer that they be seen and heard, that they know they are held, every bit of their body and soul, held in a Love that is deep and wide and complete.

As this 2020 campaign season has moved into its second and third decade, coinciding almost entirely with the first seven months of pandemic, my commitment to that spiritual practice has faltered. I'm exhausted and angry and afraid. My patience is nearly depleted. And all my arrogance and self-righteousness are close to the surface. Interrupting my unfiltered rage and judgement has gotten more difficult over time, rather than smoother and more authentic through repetition. Still, I don't want my primary default response to even a small part of the world to be a curse. I don't want the bile that creates in me or the malevolence it unleashes into the world. So I keep calling myself back to prayer, even if the swearing and name-calling come first. I have fifteen more days to practice—this time around—letting my seeing of yard signs be a prayer.

And I, and you and all of us, have many opportunities each day, in campaign season and beyond the election, to let both ordinary, integral moments of our lives and crucial, moments out of time, be a prayer.

To my mind one of the great definitions of prayer appears in novelist Elizabeth George's first Inspector Lynley mystery, *A Great Deliverance*:

He had never thought of himself as much of a praying man, but as he sat in the car in the growing darkness and the minutes passed, he knew what it was to pray. It was to will goodness out of evil, hope out of despair, life out of death. It was to will dreams into existence and spectres into reality. It was to will an end to anguish and a beginning to joy.

It's a powerful, elegant passage, and says something important about prayer—but for a faith leader's purposes it doesn't say not enough. That passage comes very near the end of the book. Inspector Lynley—the *he* in the quote—has solved the horrific, generational crime, broken his sergeant's heart open for pain and healing, and created space for a damaged, estranged family's reunion—though reconciliation was by no means certain to come to fruition. There is no more story left through which to reveal whether or not goodness emerged out of evil, if hope became despair, if anguish gave way to embryonic joy. No more story left for exploring if and how prayer is efficacious—that is to say, does willing dreams into existence, specters into reality, goodness out of evil, life out death--does willing any of it make a difference? Since Elizabeth George is a novelist not a theologian, it's ok that she drops that nugget into the book and leaves it there. It makes Tommy Lynley a more sympathetic and appealing character, and leaves the reader wanting more of his stories. She's done her job.

Since I'm a preacher I get to pick up that nugget and do my job: pondering aloud what it looks like outside of the pages of book, in the embodied lives we live, to will goodness out of evil, hope out of despair, life out of death, to will an end to anguish and a beginning to joy. I think we have to know that first, before we can begin to consider whether or not it works, or even what it means for prayer to work.

I believe prayer often begins exactly as George has Lynley describe: with a fervent and perhaps pre-cognition willing; a cry to whatever powers may be: make it so. The willing is the seed, the germ, the spark of prayer, but if the process ends with the willing, it never becomes fully prayer. Action, our volitional human action, transforms the seed, the spark, into whole, potent, possibility generating prayer.

Renown 20th century Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, when asked if he had had time to pray while he was in Selma marching with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, replied, "I prayed with my feet." Heschel surely had uttered—in his silent heart and in his audible voice, in private devotions and in public worship—hundreds of prayers for civil rights, for an end to violence, for hearts to crack open and turn toward love and justice. He, and Dr. King, and all the other faith leaders and lay leaders and private citizens of all ages who walked across the bridge that day, on the third attempt, in the shadow of Bloody Sunday, surely had all willed goodness out of evil, anguish into joy countless times. And he, they all, knew that the prayer was incomplete without the action of their feet. If willing alone was prayer enough the march from Selma to Montgomery would not have taken place, would never even been imagined.

If willing alone were prayer enough the Black Lives Matter movement would not be necessary. #MeToo, #SayHer Name, #AbolishICE, #DefundthePolice, the Standing Rock Water Protectors, mask mandates, the call for a national minimum wage--none of these or any other demands for justice, calls to care for one another and our earth home, would be necessary if willing alone were prayer enough to bring dreams into existence.

If we had a good way to darken the sanctuary and adequate technology for projecting images this portion of the sermon would be a slide show. Snapshots or videos of prayer:

Hundreds of people waiting in line for up to ten hours to vote in Georgia this past week. They are praying for justice and economic relief and the future of the Supreme Court.

Restaurants that have pivoted in the course of this pandemic to distributing groceries to neighbors and others in need. They are praying to end hunger. Praying to fulfill their mission of hospitality under new and confusing and frightening circumstances. Praying to survive through hustle while still fulfilling their mission of hospitality.

Doctors, nurses, housekeepers, and other essential medical care workers going to bed alone in basements and spare bedrooms rather than risk infecting their families by entering the main living areas of their homes. They are praying that they don't expose the ones they love to a deadly virus they might have brought home with them.

Those same essential medical workers donning PPE all over again and beginning their next shift. They are praying for the comfort and healing of their patients. They are praying they don't have to literally give their own life in service of doing their life's work.

Grocery store cashiers standing behind plexiglass. They are praying to stay healthy, to keep their jobs, to be able to pay rent, mortgage, and other bills. Pray to serve the neighbors who are their customers without becoming sick.

Protestors in Minneapolis and Portland, Oregon and Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, and Louisville, Kentucky. They are praying for black lives, for brown lives, for their lives, for our lives.

Participants in scores of Women's Marches across the country yesterday. They are praying for the dignity and safety and fulfillment of their lives, their daughters' lives, their sisters' and grandmothers', and all women's lives.

A dozen, two dozen, three dozen pictures of friends and family members and acquaintances and church members with their mail-in ballots and *I Voted* stickers. They are voting for their children's education. For their medical care. For their veterans' benefits. For the sanctity of their marriages and protection of their families. For their livelihoods. For their security in retirement. For their access to justice.

In a sense we've all been sitting in a car in the growing darkness all our lives (though perhaps never more than now) willing all the things--goodness out of evil, hope out of despair, life out of death, an end to anguish and a beginning to joy. And we haven't just been sitting there willing. We've been completing the prayer with action in countless ways, every day. Now, with the start of early voting and vote by mail we have shifted toward voting as a prayer, so beautifully, powerfully described by my friend and colleague Luke Stevens-Royer. We're voting as prayer, as an act of worship. And then we

*rise from prayer,
and turn in [our] ballot[s]*

...

*and again ... set to the task that is [ours]:
justice, mercy, humble service
in [our]small corner of the world.*

We get to do it every day. We are called to do it every day. Let our very lives be a prayer.

Amen.