

Dangerous Prayers

From the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples:

*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven*

A poem by Galway Kinnell, called *Prayer*:

*Whatever happens. Whatever
what is is is what
I want. Only that. But that.*

If you've been listening to me preach for a while, you know, I think, that I read a lot of books. I like to read books by people whose writing reveals a deep inner life, the kind of life I want for myself. Books by people who are ahead of me in understanding something about who is this God that designed this world, and what about this Jesus I want to follow? I read books that open up a new train of thought, some path that I hadn't seen before in the overgrown thicket that is my day-to-day life. Once I read an interview with an author who was asked, "How do you pray?" The answer was, "I underline sentences." And I thought, 'Yes, exactly!' That's how I pray too; I listen for the voice of God in conversations someone else has had and written down.

And what you might appropriately hear as I say that last bit is that for all my reading, and the many years I have tried to be intentional about a life of faith, I am rather unconfident about my own prayer. How to pray; what to pray; whether I am doing it right, or enough, or with the kind of devotion that does anything other than disappoint God regularly. And because no one wants to be alone in their insecurity, I really love it when another writer whose work and spirituality I admire confesses that they too have difficulty with their own prayer life.

Like Shannan Martin, the author of *The Ministry of Ordinary Places*, a book I've recommended to you recently. She says, "Here's the thing about me and prayer: I'm no good at it. My prayers are fleeting. Desperate. Weak and uncertain, just like me." (p. 103) Or this writer, whose words I copied down so many years ago, I can't even find a name. Whoever it was, he or she said,

*I love the poets who say that when we pray, God is 'nearer than hands and feet,' but I
have to say it: My prayer life is not much like a walk through a rose garden. Not only
does Jesus not come to the garden alone to see me, not walk with me and talk with me,
not meet me in the garden; lots of times I wonder if I'm even in the right zip code.*

I'm just guessing here, but I'm going to venture that you might have felt something similar from time to time. So as we begin a new year together, and especially a year when we want—*we need*—so much to find and to be aligned with God's best hopes for us, we're going to talk for a few weeks about prayer. Not just any prayers, but *dangerous* prayers. The kind of prayers that might have a consequence beyond your intentions. The kind of prayers that do what I think all good prayer does, which is to change things. Maybe even to change you.

I think we have to acknowledge from the start that our tradition offers some pretty mixed messages about how to pray and what to pray for. Right there in the Gospels, Jesus says, “Ask and you will receive. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door will be opened.” (Luke 11:9) Lots of people have heard those words and taken from them that God is just waiting to give you everything you are willing to pray hard enough to get. Not too many years ago, a whole cottage industry grew out of a little book that was published called *The Prayer of Jabez*, which took an obscure two-line story from the Old Testament as proof that God was standing by to expand every pray-er’s influence and power and stock portfolio.

There’s no question the Bible tells us to pray hard and long and often. All of its stories encourage the discipline of persistence. The things that really matter are worth staying with. One of the ways we demonstrate what we care about is to keep depositing our concern into God’s hands. But every one of us knows that all prayers are not answered. Not everyone we love is spared from illness; not every favor we ask for is granted. Jesus said ‘Keep asking for what you need,’ but when his disciples said to him ‘Tell us how you pray,’ he included just two requests:

Give us this day our daily bread. Only what we need, just enough for today.
And then,

Thy will be done. Do what you will, God; not what I ask.

Some faithful people have taken Jesus’ prayer to mean that our *only* prayer should be ‘Thy will be done;’ that our spiritual work is to erase from our mental agendas and petitions anything other than what God has already decided to do. That’s never really made sense to me. If prayer is our way of conversing with God, the way you and God get to know and understand one another, it has to be pretty unsatisfying for one partner to keep saying nothing other than ‘I don’t know; whatever you want.’ I don’t think spiritual shyness is not what Jesus recommended. It’s real relationship that he modeled for us: using prayer to make ourselves vulnerable, opening to God whatever it is we hope for and think we need; risking that we might not receive what we want, that God’s will is something different than our own.

I don’t think Jesus meant that our stance toward what happens in the world should be ‘Whatever.’ Detachment is nowhere in the pattern of responses that Jesus demonstrated toward any form of suffering, any *one’s* suffering. This might be one of the ways Christianity differs from popular forms of Buddhism. Jesus never removed himself from feeling hardship; he reached toward it; he engaged it with compassionate action, every time. Prayer in the way of Jesus must be also a step in that direction. The great preacher and theologian William Sloan Coffin often said that prayer is not meant to be an act of self-expression. It’s an act of empathy.

So what does it mean to pray, ‘Thy will be done’? And what’s the purpose of that prayer, when every time we look around, we see a reality that does *not* match what we hope is the will, or the goodness, of God?

I lead a small group on Mondays at noon, and every week I ask a check-in question. A few weeks ago I asked, ‘Of all the things that are wrong in the world right now, is there one thing that

particularly tugs at your heart, or calls you to attention?’ The women in that group answered thoughtfully. They talked about COVID victims, and people who are painfully alone. Children who are struggling with remote schooling, small business owners, even animals that are suffering. Lord knows, there are many situations you could name, and they did. But when I thought about answering my question myself, what I felt, honestly, was...nothing. I felt numb, as if my nerve endings have been deadened to a thousand things that I know must be breaking God’s heart right now. Maybe it’s compassion fatigue. Maybe the landscape of need and pain in the world has been so unbroken this last year, that I’ve lost the capacity to be moved by it. It kind of scared me.

And then, a couple of days later, this verse caught up with me, from the 37th Psalm: *Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.* (Psalm 37:4) On its face this seems like another one of those sayings that makes God sound like a vending machine. But what if I’ve been reading it wrong all these years? What if the Psalmist was writing from the same desert of empathy that I’ve been feeling? What if what God gives us when we’re soaking up our connection with him is not the *object* of our desires, but the desires themselves? What if prayer is the thing that *shapes* our desires? When I am feeling dry and distant, this is what I miss: the desire itself—a warmhearted, outwardly-focused attention—that is the mark of a good and whole and compassionate life. It’s not God’s care for the world that can sometimes go flat; it’s mine.

Maybe prayer itself has the power to sculpt that attention—that desire—in me.

Do you know the poet Galway Kinnell? Unlike some writers, he was not a passive or distanced observer of life. He was an activist. “Galway Kinnell cares about everything,” another writer once said about him. And it’s true; Kinnell was passionate about many causes: the antiwar movement of the 1960’s, freedom of expression in repressive countries, environmental justice. Late in his life, years after he’d established a career as a college professor and published writer, he went to work for the Congress on Racial Equality. He believed it was the job of poets to bear witness. “To me,” he once said, “poetry is somebody standing up and saying, with as little concealment as possible, what it is...to be on earth at this moment.”

The poem we read a few minutes ago is one Kinnell wrote shortly before his death in 2014. Listen to it again.

*Whatever happens. Whatever
what is is is what
I want. Only that. But that.*

This is ‘whatever’ in a different kind of voice. It doesn’t dismiss reality; it welcomes it, radically. ‘Whatever happens’ is the kind of promise that people make to one another when they marry. It’s ‘whatever’ not as a first reaction, but as a last word, a final commitment to accepting *what is*, life on its own terms. This prayer is an internal commitment *not* to disrupt *what is* with our own wants. It’s knowing, and speaking, the desires of your heart and then consciously putting them away, deferring to a bigger knowing. It’s the trust that’s embedded in the prayer *Thy will be done.*

Mold me, this prayer—this poem—says. Shape my desires into yours, God. Let me learn to see the world the way you do, until I can see that *what is* is worth loving—worth desiring—with my whole heart.