

# “To Whom It May Concern”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Reflection on “The Mass” by Leonard Bernstein

A note about this morning’s music. . .

There is really nothing else quite like it.

*The Mass* written by Leonard Bernstein in 1971  
for the opening of the Kennedy Centre in Washington, D.C.,  
is a work for the stage that involves an enormous cast,  
with a large pit orchestra, two choruses, a boys’ choir,  
a ballet company, a rock band, and a marching band.

It is a theatre piece that encompasses the full history of Western music, ranging from Gregorian chant to rock.

And, it is a theological tour de force that tells the story of a priest who has lost his faith, whose trust in all that he has believed crumbles to dust.

Bernstein deconstructs the traditional texts of the Latin Mass,  
juxtaposing them with biting bits of social commentary  
and direct confrontations with God.

In the Credo, the soloist sings out:  
“I Believe in God (But Does God Believe in Me?).”

For the Gloria, Paul Simon gave Bernstein these wonderful words:

Half the people are stoned  
and the other half are waiting for the next election  
Half the people are drowned

and the other half are swimming in the wrong direction.

Apparently, Richard Nixon directed the FBI to attend rehearsals to determine whether there was anything subversive embedded in the Latin lyrics that might embarrass him.

They apparently found enough anti-war sentiment there that Nixon opted not to attend the opening of the Kennedy Centre.

Which is too bad, because he missed the point.

Bernstein's *Mass* is the story of the painful loss of faith,  
but it is also the story about what we might call faith beyond faith.

About how we put the fractured pieces of faith back together  
when everything lies shattered at our feet.

About how we hold on to a glimmer of hope,  
when all has been lost.

This morning, Lucas and Lisa will share two movements from *The Mass* that speak to the place of prayer in all of this.

The first comes from the Gloria, in which we hear the lamentation,  
the loss of no longer being able to summon words of praise and thanksgiving.

The second movement, perhaps the most famous,  
is "Simple Song," the movement sung by the priest near the beginning.

There is an innocence here that doesn't last as *The Mass* unfolds.  
Yet, after all the questioning and disillusionment,  
it is this same simple song that returns as an affirmation of faith.

It is because this faith has been truly tested  
that this simple song, when it returns, has a quiet power  
that didn't exist, and maybe couldn't have existed, before.

**Reading**                    **"On Prayer" by Czeslaw Milosz**

You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.  
All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge  
And walking it we are aloft, as on a springboard,  
Above landscapes the color of ripe gold  
Transformed by a magic stopping of the sun.

That bridge leads to the shore of Reversal  
Where everything is just the opposite and the word 'is'  
Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.

Notice: I say we; there, every one, separately,  
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh  
And knows that if there is no other shore  
We will walk that aerial bridge all the same.

### **The Sermon: “To Whom It May Concern”**

Maybe you saw the photo in *The Globe and Mail* this week, as well.

It was taken in front of the First Baptist Church,  
somewhere in Pennsylvania, and showed the church’s sign,  
nearly covered over with snow, with a message that read:  
“Whoever keeps praying for snow, please stop!”

I can’t be sure, but I’d be willing to bet there was quite a bit of praying  
going on here in Toronto last Tuesday night.

School children throughout the city praying that this might, at long last,  
be the storm that would cancel classes.

Parents in every corner of the GTA, praying anxiously  
that the weather predictions might prove greatly overdone.

And, miracle of miracles. . . , everyone’s prayers were answered!

Not only were schools closed, but we didn’t get all that much snow.

Now, I don’t, of course,

believe that prayer has the power to change the weather.

What a mess we would be in if it did.

For every person praying for a blizzard,  
there is someone out there praying desperately that the storm will pass by—  
so that the flight of a dearly missed girlfriend will get in safely,  
so that a waiter can make it to work  
    and earn enough money to feed himself,  
so that loved ones can gather at a bedside  
    before the one they love is gone.

Prayer can be a messy thing if it is seen only as a means  
to getting what we want—a way to pull divine strings  
and change circumstance to somehow fit our needs.

As a spiritual practice, though, prayer is about more than that.

It's about the possibility of changing ourselves—  
of coming to make the most of the circumstances we're in.

It's about adjusting our own attitude—  
listening deeply for a voice within and maybe a voice without,  
that helps us to find contentment amid life's storms,  
to find strength to bring change when it is called for,  
and to find patience to endure, when it's not.

The poet Rabindranath Tagore got at this approach to prayer  
in his poem "Let me not pray":

Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers,  
But to be fearless in facing them.

Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain,  
But for the heart to conquer it.

Let me not look for allies in life's battlefield,  
But to my own strength.

Let me not crave in anxious fear to be saved,  
But hope for the patience to win my freedom.

Grant me that I may not be a coward,  
feeling your mercy in my success alone,  
But let me find the grasp of your hand in my failure[, too].<sup>1</sup>

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As you might imagine, our tradition has a complicated relationship with prayer.

It was an integral part of our public and private worship for a very long time,  
but when we began to openly question the existence and nature of God,  
prayer started, for many Unitarians,  
to seem a frivolous expenditure of both thought and air.

Why bother praying if no one's out there to listen?

And, why bother praying to some distant deity  
to do what we can do for ourselves?

I'm grateful our tradition has asked such questions through the years—  
questions each of us may have wrestled with in our time and turn.

But I wonder if our only option is to abandon prayer altogether.

I wonder if we could open ourselves instead to the possibility  
that there just might be more to prayer than sending a shopping list up to the heavens  
in hopes of having our every wish fulfilled.

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When I was in seminary, each Wednesday, at noon,  
there was an interfaith service in the chapel.

After being run by Unitarians and liberal Protestants  
for almost of two centuries, a shift was made when I was a student

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<sup>1</sup> "Let me not pray" by Rabindranath Tagore.

to have the chapel services reflect the religious diversity of the school itself.

Every faith group was invited to contribute a worship service each term that held true to their own particular tradition.

The Quakers invited us into silence and deep listening.

The Buddhists to meditation and chanting.

The Anglicans offered us communion.

And the Muslims called us to prayer.

When the Unitarians' turn came around,  
it fell to me to lead the one part that each faith group was asked  
to somehow incorporate into their service: The Prayers of the People.

On the surface of things, this seemed quite an easy thing for me to do.

These prayers were not unlike the Book of Joys and Sorrows  
that can be found here and in many Unitarian Universalist congregations.

As members of the community filed into the chapel,  
they were invited to write out a brief personal concern,  
a thanksgiving or prayer request to be shared later.

At lunch following that service where I had led the prayers,  
a friend joked at the irony that I,  
one of the most ardent Humanists on campus,  
had been asked to pray—and in public, no less.

I challenged him, arguing that you don't have to believe in God to pray.

That stopped conversation cold at the table—even at “Godless Harvard.”  
Eyebrows and hackles were raised.

The standard wisecracks about Unitarians addressing our prayers  
“To whom it may concern” were rolled out,  
as though I had never heard them before.

It was at this point that the Anglican priest seated across from me  
looked up from her salad in horror to ask what on earth I was thinking.

Theologically, she wanted to know exactly what I thought I had been doing up there behind the altar.

I took a deep breath and began to explain my belief that prayer is more horizontal than vertical. I said I believe there is power and strength to be found in holding up in the middle of a community the joys and the sorrows, the thanksgivings and the concerns that touch our lives—so that we might together honour what makes us human, so that we may know the depth of connection that is between us, as well as our connection to that which is bigger and beyond us.

And, then I said, probably sounding a lot more snarky than I intended, that if there is a God up there somewhere in the heavens, I genuinely hoped She had been listening in.

I was sincere.  
While I see prayer on a horizontal plane,  
I'm open to the possibility that there could be a vertical dimension, as well.

Now, it was clear my approach to prayer didn't work for her one bit. It's why she's an Anglican priest, after all, and why I'm not. I also realise my approach to prayer does not work for everyone. And, I realise it may not work for you.

But, this morning, I ask you to consider what does work for you. I ask that you to give thought to the place of prayer in your life.

You might not call it prayer, and it may look nothing like what you once were taught or believed.

But, what are the ways—what are the tools you use—to open yourself to the sacred voice within and without?

How and when do still your mind long enough that your heart can begin to speak?

Whether you call it prayer or meditation or thoughtful contemplation, whether it's done drifting off to sleep or while brushing your teeth, what spiritual practice do you use to regularly examine your life?

I ask because I know it takes discipline  
to consider what sits enshrined at the centre of our lives.

And, I ask because in our busy world,  
it takes deliberate practice to uncover our ultimate concern—  
to align our lives over and over again with what we most deeply care about—  
what a colleague of mine says we can most easily discover  
by asking ourselves what breaks our heart.<sup>2</sup>

Our spiritual ancestors called this work “meditative self-examination.”

I find that has a few too many syllables to say repeatedly in one sermon,  
so I’m speaking today of prayer.

But, whatever you call it, whatever shape it takes,  
my hope for each of you is that you have a place carved out of your days  
to express gratitude,  
to bow in reverence before the majesty and the mysteries of this life,  
to acknowledge how we sometimes miss the mark,  
and to recognise that we need strength and courage  
that can’t always come from ourselves alone.

Because this work takes time and effort, it’s easy enough not to do it,  
or to end up only doing it by accident—  
accidentally being gobsmacked by the grandeur of nature,  
accidentally discovering our lives are too small,  
accidentally crying out “Oh, God” in a moment  
of terror or desperation or even ecstasy  
and knowing in an instant how very fragile and precious this life is.

Any moment of such sacred awareness is a prayer.

But, one’s prayer life need not be so hit or miss;  
it doesn’t have to happen always by accident.

Now, to some, I know even the thought of praying can feel about

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the Reverend Daniel Kanter.

as exciting and glamorous as flossing.

I know that some of you are wondering why on earth I'm even preaching about this.

And, I'm guessing that there are a beloved handful of you who haven't actually heard anything since I first said the word "prayer" about twelve minutes ago. . .

Barbra Brown Taylor, an Anglican priest who left the priesthood when she lost her faith, or at least lost her way for a time, wonderfully describes the resistance many of us might feel.

I would rather show someone my checkbook stubs  
than talk about my prayer life.

I would rather confess that I am a rotten godmother,  
that I struggle with my weight,  
that I fear I am overly fond of Bombay Sapphire gin martinis  
than confess that I am a prayer-weakling. . . .

The only way [she says] I have found to survive my shame  
is to come at the problem from both sides,  
exploring two distinct possibilities:  
1) that prayer is more than my idea of prayer and  
2) that some of what I actually do in my life  
may constitute genuine prayer.<sup>3</sup>

Taylor goes on to speak of the anxiety of "waiting to learn whether your child will come home, whether your marriage will last, whether the war will end, whether the market will recover."

And she says that, "If uncertainties like these are the sort that move people to pray, then that is because they are the ones that remind us how little real sway we have."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 183-4.

Sometimes prayer is the way we simply acknowledge that we're not in control.

That we're not driving the bus to the extent that we maybe thought we were.

Prayer, by whatever name it is known,  
is the place where we rest for a while in the face of our vulnerabilities,  
where we hold up our fears to the light  
and maybe even the hopes we can barely speak.

It is that place where we listen for our truest voice,  
or that voice that calls us beyond ourselves into bolder ways of living.

It is the place where we give thanks and where we celebrate the glories of this life.

And, it is the innermost shrine in which we can live out an examined life.

In her poem "How I Go to the Woods," Mary Oliver paints an image  
of this sanctuary better than I ever could:

Ordinarily I go to the woods alone, with not a single friend,  
for they are all smilers and talkers and therefore unsuitable.

I don't really want to be witnessed talking to the catbirds  
or hugging the old black oak tree.  
I have my way of praying, as you no doubt have yours.

Besides, when I am alone I can become invisible.  
I can sit on the top of a dune as motionless as an uprise of weeds,  
until the foxes run by unconcerned.  
I can hear the almost unhearable sound of the roses singing.

If you have ever gone to the woods with me, [she writes]  
I must love you very much.

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There is a question often asked these days, and rightly so,  
about the efficacy of prayer.

Does it really work?

A number of studies have undertaken in recent years to test whether patients who are prayed for do better than those who are not.

The findings have, at best, been contradictory.

But, skeptic that I am, I'm finding I'm less and less interested in knowing the answer to whether prayer has the power to change things.

What many others have long said I am finally finding to be true: that prayer changes people and that people change things.

That doesn't mean we always have the power to heal the sick or to turn back storms, but prayer can deepen our capacity to live with integrity, compassion, and grace.

And, that, in the end, is the truest measure of our days on this earth.

So, let us be ever more intentional about the many ways we pray, that we might make of our lives an endless. loving prayer.

Amen.