

A Pathway for Our Steps

by Rev. Kathy Speas

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Psalm 85:8-13 Luke 11:1-13

Oh great. A Biblical text that is actually comprehensible, and it's Jesus singing "When You Wish Upon A Star." Telling them just to visualize the reality they want, and it will manifest.

Have you received all you've asked for? Found all you've ever sought? Gotten to open doors number one, two and three just by knocking? But, can any of us say that after trying to know God, trying to pray and meditate, trying to connect with sacredness, that absolutely nothing in our inner or outer lives has changed at all?

Now it's not news that we seek one thing, but God all too often gives us something else, often something that is not The Good News at all. Country music (which is just modern day Psalms) sings "God's Greatest Gifts Are Unanswered Prayers." Thank God I'm not stuck with a reality I visualized when I was 20.

Prayer doesn't work, but it sure is powerful. This story comes in Luke when Jesus has healed physical and mental illness, brought a couple of dead people back to life, and stopped a big storm with His command. But what do the disciples want? "Teach us to pray," they ask. Not teach us how to heal, how to raise the dead, but teach us to pray. And we look eagerly to this passage for just that direction. Teach us to pray. Teach us to participate meaningfully and deliberately in the mystery. Teach us to dance in God's dream.

So, Jesus says God will give us what we ask for, but our lives tell us that we don't get what we want. We don't want what we need. And God only knows what we are going to get. Books, and tapes, and seminars, and workshops, and classes about Prayer proliferate as modern life gets scarier and scarier, and feels more and more out

of control. Certainly out of our own control. And seemingly out of the control of a benevolent, healing, merciful God of Peace. Love and hard work don't seem to be doing it anymore. Prayer seems more urgent than ever.

Well, I'm up here in a pulpit, so I guess you're all looking to me to tell you how to pray. Or to pray with some enlightened, now-fully-ordained power that you don't have. Or to at least offer up some wisdom that will make the snakes and scorpions OK.

Well, forget it. I got ordained, but I didn't get any special prayer mojo. I could explain all I learned in seminary about different theories of prayer, and maybe bore you into a prayerful state. I don't have a special prayer technique. I just have this calling to persist at prayer like the guy bugging his friend for bread. I'm a hospice chaplain. I bug God like a pesky kid. I may not pray well, but I sure pray often! And in many, many different ways.

So, I'm not going to explain prayer, because that would take away its mystery. And if I could tell everyone how to pray so that Jesus' promise did ring true in our lives, and it was OK when it didn't, that would take the power of God's dream out of the whole equation. Let me just share some of my experiences. Some of the things I see.

1. Prayer appears in infinitely different forms. One of my most profound prayer times was reading Robert Louis Stevenson's "A Child's Garden of Verses" with a man in his 80s who had loved those poems as a child. A day or two before his death, we read the poem where the child who sails his boats in the river that "flows along forever with trees on either hand" realizes that "other little children will bring my boats ashore." We remembered the simple joy of going up in a swing, up in the air so blue. There's a poem, "My Bed is a Boat," where the child narrator says, "At night I go on board and say, good night to all my friends in shore; I shut my eyes and sail away, and see and hear no more." As we sat, musing together about when he might die, today? tomorrow? before the solstice? after the solstice? we saw a leaf fall off a tree. The

first falling leaf of the year. The silence we shared, that was a profound prayer, that I almost didn't recognize. A moment of openness, surrender.

2. God is present at the depths of our despair. I visit with the husband of a patient who is debilitated with Alzheimer's. Nice Methodist fellow from Texas. He lives upstairs in the nursing home, she lives downstairs on the locked dementia unit, and he visits her at night to tuck her in and say their prayers together. Now we had talked about God, we had prayed, but one day I happened to visit him just after he had fallen and begun to decline, and he was unable to go downstairs and check on his wife. And he was really scared. And sad beyond words. And he took my hands, and poured forth a prayer that God would make the weekend staff take better care of his wife, and that God would make him strong enough to get downstairs again, and he thanked God for their life and for her, and I thanked God for the both of them, and he asked God to give her comfort, and I asked God to bless them and be fully present, and we both emptied it all out. And he got some comfort, praise be to God! And he felt some peace, praise the Lord! I realized, you can rationalize in your mind, you can make your body act any way you want, but you can't fool your heart. You can't fool your heart, and this is where prayer starts.

3. Prayer is relational. I think prayer is such a comfort because it reminds us that we are not alone. Jesus gives us these beautiful relational images of a Father and child, friends, people we spend time with even when we aren't asking for anything. Swedenborg notes that the Lord's Prayer unites Heaven and Earth, line by line – The Hallowed Name, Thy Kingdom Come, give us this day our daily bread, let go of sins, keep us from evil – heaven to hell in five lines. Steadfast love and faithfulness. Righteousness and peace. The Lord's gift and the yield of our literal and spiritual ground. A path for our steps.

So there are some images of how we pray, what we pray, when we pray, who prays and who listens. But why do we pray?

Someone told me a story, second hand (the best kind of story, really), of a couple whose 4 or 5-year old desperately wanted to go into the room of their newborn and talk with the baby. They could not imagine what for, but let the kid go into the baby's room. The baby monitor was on. They heard the kid say to the baby, "You gotta tell me what God looks like. I forgot."

We're trying to remember the face of God. So, let us...

Sing our prayers

Dance our prayers

Dream our prayers

Work our prayers

Cry out our prayers

Recite our prayers

Whisper our prayers

Imagine our prayers

Paint our prayers

Moan and groan our prayers

Hope our prayers

Believe our prayers

Live our prayers

May each one of us remember what God looks like. And as we remember, may we share the beauty of God's face with the world. Amen.