

One Sentence Message: We may reframe our concept of prayer so that it works for our varying theologies as Unitarian Universalists.

There are words used in religious context that are troublesome to many UU's. I want to run some definitions by you. You can tell me by your laughter or frowns how closely these definitions match what you may have experienced.

God: An angry old white man with a beard. He controls everything. He's good, but inexplicably, let's bad stuff happen to good people. Pause

Prayer: A petition to the God of the previous definition. People of different faiths, or even the same faith, ask God for vastly different outcomes around the same issues. God must get confused.

Sin: That which is forbidden by a literal and selective reading of the Bible. Sins include, but are not limited to, masturbation and same sex intimate relations. Murder of young black men is not a sin, but the abortion of a nonviable fetus is.

Worship: The act of expressing reverence toward a divine being or supernatural powerⁱ; reverence and adoration for a deityⁱⁱ.

If these definitions form our gut level response to these religious words, then it is no wonder that we have issues with them.

In 1989 Marcus Borg, the late progressive New Testament scholar, wrote that literalization of language in the modern period and interpretation of language within a framework he calls "heaven and hell" Christianity has led to new definitions of religious words. That was a mouthful. Let me repeat it. Biblical and traditional meanings were often very different.ⁱⁱⁱ Guess what. It's only gotten worse.

George Lakoff, in his 2004 book *Don't Think of An Elephant*, republished in 2014, discusses how public conversation is framed by the words one chooses to get into the public discourse. Now think of the word Christian. In the public discourse, Christian has largely come to mean fundamentalist evangelical Christians. If one is Christian and progressive or liberal, one has to modify one's statement, claiming this distinction. And even with the distinction, in our minds we often tend to paint all Christians with the same brush. We have Christians under the UU umbrella. Mostly, they are quiet about it, fearing scorn from their fellow church members.

In the coming months I will take a closer look at some of these problem words and how we might understand them in ways that are useful to our Unitarian Universalist beliefs--while remembering that those beliefs are not at all homogenous among us.

Included on my list of problematic words are those which I defined a few minutes ago. Other words which I will examine include evil, grace and forgiveness. There are undoubtedly others.

I'm still taking suggestions, so drop me a note if there is a problematic word you'd like to hear discussed.

This morning our problematic word is prayer. I've heard through the grapevine that there are those among you who would rather not have a pastoral prayer included in our time together. Others of you are very much in favor. As I said, our beliefs are not homogenous. Hear me out. Perhaps when I am done, you will be more comfortable with including prayer in our religious vocabulary and practice. Or we may respectfully agree to disagree.

Types of Prayer

It was in a worship associate training before seminary that I was first formally exposed to the different types of prayer. Four types are often suggested. Some faiths suggest 6 or 8. We will use four, for now. There is prayer which praises God. There is prayer which petitions God for something we want. Intercessory prayer asks God to intervene for someone else. Finally, one prays to give thanks for what God has provided.

I'm sure you've noticed, and herein lies our difficulty, that all of these definitions assume belief in a theistic God, meaning a God who is in control of everything. How do we approach prayer if we are not theist, while allowing that some of us are?

Praise

Let's look at praise. What or whom do we praise, if not God? There is much. We can praise the beauty of the universe as manifested in some of the pictures we have seen from NASA. We can praise Earth and all her creations. We can praise the perfection of a child, or a sunset, or a rose. We can praise the exquisite beauty of some of what humans have created. We can praise Beethoven's 9th Symphony or the poetry which Mary Oliver has offered us.

Thanks Giving

Prayers of thanks giving are close cousins to praise prayers and may be the easiest for many UU's to deal with. We can all give thanks. We all do give thanks, but perhaps not as often as we might. We can give thanks for the food which is in front of us, and for the many, from the migrant farm workers to the distributors who helped to get it to our tables. We can give thanks for the ability to greet another new day. We can give thanks for our children's laughter--or that they are sleeping. When we give thanks, we may be thanking someone else, or ourselves, or Earth, or even God.

Petition and Intercessory

Petition and Intercessory prayers may be most difficult for many UU's. If we don't believe in a controlling God or in any God at all, how then do we ask for something, for ourselves or for others? I submit to you that when we ask, we can frame that ask in a way that matches our

theology. Perhaps we are asking the universe. Perhaps we are asking the Great Spirit or the Spirit of Life or Universal Love. Perhaps we are asking that still small voice within, our innermost selves, our best selves. Our own Jim Goodridge has this definition of prayer. "Prayer is asking yourself for what you really want." We are not asking for miracles, in the sense of supernatural. We are asking that we be open to influence by that which is divine or holy, whether it be inside us or out.

I'd like to share a story about that.

Story

As some of you know, I am a veteran of peacetime service with the Navy. My experience in uniform has left me with a tender place in my heart for veterans, particularly those damaged by war. The church where I did my internship, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Santa Rosa, regularly fed 100 to 200 persons who were homeless or hungry on Saturday mornings. I volunteered at some of those breakfasts.

On one particular morning I'd been working serving food. After the line finally slowed to a trickle, I got some breakfast for myself and asked two men sitting at a table by themselves if I could join them. I don't remember exactly how the conversation started, but it quickly came out that one of them, let's call him Bob, was a Viet Nam vet, deeply traumatized by what our government had paid him to do during his war service. He had an endless tape playing in his head: "I killed eight people and my government paid me to do it."

In their book *Soul Repair*, Gabriella Lettini, a Starr King seminary professor, and co-author Rita Brock, differentiate between Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and what they call Moral Injury. Bob clearly had a tormented soul; he was morally injured. I tried to remember all that I had learned in my previous year of training as a hospital chaplain. At some point in the conversation I identified myself as one of the ministers. "So you're a man of God?" he asked. "I try to be," I answered, not exactly comfortable with my answer.

By this time the cleanup crew was stripping tablecloths and breaking down tables. My companion had barely touched his breakfast. I wanted him to eat, maybe his one decent meal of the week, and I hoped that there was something I could do which might soothe his anguish. Working on intuition, I asked if he would like a prayer. "Prayer is always good," he replied.

I asked to hold his hands and I started a conversation with the God I was reasonably certain that he believed in. I explained how I was here with Bob and he was feeling a lot of guilt about his actions during the war. I asked God to forgive Bob. I spoke of other details of his life he had shared with me and how he was feeling about them. I asked for understanding. I prayed that Bob would find peace.

When I wrapped up, I looked into his face and he appeared almost peaceful. He looked like he had shed a 100 pound pack. He thanked me. As he went back to eating, I said my goodbye.

I am still amazed at the power of prayer. I have had similar experiences in the hospital with patients. My personal belief around what is happening is that by my being open to the Divine Love which surrounds and is within each of us, the recipient of the prayer permits herself to open to this Love. The effects are sometimes quite extraordinary.

There are other things which we do which I would include under the umbrella of prayer. As we heard from Ken, writing poetry is for him a prayerful act, as it seems also to be for Mary Oliver. Any creative act, deeply engaged in, may be considered prayer. For some, this is music or dance or acting. The way in which serious mathematicians approach numbers can be prayerful. Many of our top scientists are deeply spiritual people.

Janet shared with us a story about listening. Listening is another form of prayer. Meditation, time when we attempt to quiet our minds, is a time when we may allow ourselves to be open to listen. Maybe we are listening for what is deepest inside of us. Or maybe we are listening for the Divine within us. Or maybe we are listening for the Divine which surrounds us. All of these beliefs are held by Unitarian Universalist's.

Conclusion

And so I ask that we reframe our concept of prayer. For us, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. I ask that when we pray, you listen from the framework which works for you. You may need to do this on the fly as I lead prayer here, as I may not always use the words which fit your individual theology. With practice and an open mind, I hope that you will come to find prayer a helpful part of your spiritual practice and what we do together here on Sunday mornings.

Blessed Be and Amen

ⁱ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/worship> Accessed 9/25/2015

ⁱⁱ http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/worship Accessed 9/25/2015

ⁱⁱⁱ From Introduction to Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Power, and How They Can Be Restored, 1989 (read on Amazon)