

## THE ART OF PRAYER

May 30, 2021

Rev. Richard Maraj

### OPENING/ANNOUNCEMENTS

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Good morning, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center! I'm Rev. Richard Maraj, senior minister, and we are so glad that you've joined us! Even more excited that next Sunday, June the 6th at 9 and 11 a.m. we will be doing our first LIVE service in the Sanctuary in over 15 months! We are so, so excited to see you back here and all be together starting next Sunday.

While the services will be live, we will be posting the video of the Sunday service probably Sunday evening from now on, starting next Sunday. Next Sunday at 11 a.m. our Youth & Family Ministry will begin, and our Wednesday services will start on June the 9th.

You know, as we're ramping up to begin our services, we could use some help on Sundays volunteering as ushers, or in our audio/visual booth. These are both important roles in areas of volunteering to keep the flow of our service going. So, if you are interested in serving in this way, please contact Sue Thompson at the church.

This Tuesday will be the final "Discover the Power Within You" class. If you'd like to join in, each class stands on its own, and I'll do a little bit of review, as well. And so come join me at Tuesday evening at 7 p.m. You can register online.

Now Rev. Lori is going to lead us in a time of prayer and meditation. And to prepare us for that experience, the choir will sing for us, "Surely the Presence."

#### ***Unity of Phoenix Choir sings "Surely the Presence"***

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place  
I can see God's mighty power and God's grace  
I can feel the brush of angels' wings  
I see glory on each face  
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place

### MEDITATION

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** I invite you to join me in a time of prayer and meditation. As we close our outer eyes and take in a deep cleansing breath, and release it slowly. And as we pray, we praise God for all of the good that God brings in to the world. And we take in another deep breath and, as we release it, we move our awareness within: away from the outer world, into the spiritual world. To that place of connection with the Divine. And that place of Oneness with Spirit.

And as we take in another mindful breath, and we release it slowly, we feel our hearts expanding, taking in more of God' unconditional love. Allowing us to love ourselves, no matter where we've been or what we may have done. To love ourselves fully, and to love each other, no matter what we look like or where we've come from or what we believe. We're here to love fully, completely, openly ... because that is our nature. Love was planted in our souls when they were created. And it's our job to spread that love lavishly everywhere across the planet, into the Universe, and into the cosmos.

We say thank you for this amazing gift of love. For the way that it allows us to see the good in people when, sometimes, they can't see it in themselves. For the way it allows us to forgive, sometimes, the unforgivable. Because that's what love was created for: to renew our connection. To allow us to let go of hurts and worries and things that no longer serve us. To rise up in consciousness. To become totally new beings: dropping the old; letting it go; releasing and rising up to that higher consciousness of our God-self: the way we were meant to live our lives.

We know, sweet Spirit, that you created us. That you sustain us. That you vitalize us. That you bring us health and wholeness in every cell of our body. And we feel your light illuminating us: each and every cell; each and every organ and system. Your light is illuminating us! And we are wholeness personified.

And so we take just a few moments to move more deeply into the silence as we feel the presence of God within.

#### SILENCE

And so, sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for this time of prayer and meditation. For the calm that we encounter when we go within. For the sweet Spirit of unconditional love that we are. For this and all our blessings, we say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

#### MESSAGE

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Thank you, Rev. Lori! That was a fabulous meditation! Really appreciate it!

So this guy is watching TV and having a beer. And then, suddenly, he yells at the screen, *“Don’t do it, man! Don’t do it! Don’t go in that building! Walk away; save yourself! Nooooooooo! Stupid, stupid man!”* And his wife calls out from the kitchen curiously, *“Hey, what are you watching in there?”* And the guy says, *“Our wedding video.”* [Laughs]

Okay; that could be the worst joke I think I’ve ever told! And I think you’re probably thinking all my jokes could use a big dose of today’s topic, which is about prayer. Lots and lots of prayer!

So I bet if I asked the question, *“Do you believe in the power of prayer?”* we would all give a resounding, *“YES!”* – that we do. And I’d like to ask a few more questions for us to consider about prayer.

So, what IS prayer? What does prayer mean to you? What role does prayer currently play in your life? What role would you like prayer to play in your life? When do you pray? How do you pray? What do you pray for? And how often to you pray?

You know, in our spiritual life and in our spiritual practice, I think it behooves us, from time to time, to pause and look at and consider our personal prayer life. And, especially, understanding our perspective on prayer and its meaning, its use and its value.

You know, in Christianity there’s whole, wide ranges of ways that we pray: talking, asking and listening. Begging, bargaining and pleading. Coaxing, flattering God in hopes that God will have mercy on us and grant us our wishes ... thinking, sometimes, *“If I pray nice enough, long enough and loud enough, God will give me what I am seeking.”*

You know, many of us have learned to pray to a God “out there,” and we have this relationship with God as almost a “spiritual Santa Claus”: as a giver of the gifts, and requesting the things that we want. Sometimes we treat God like a spiritual slot machine, throwing Hail Mary wishful prayers out there, hoping we might hit it big one day.

Sometimes we think of God as being the one who gets in our way and withholds blessings and opportunities, and denies us some of the things that we want in our lives. Sometimes we think that God just doesn’t care. God doesn’t listen. That God is more like an absentee landlord.

You know, when we have this idea of God being “out there,” and that God is only about asking for things and being the grantor of gifts for us, we really turn our relationship with the Divine into one of a very cold business transaction. *“I pray and ask; you give.”* And it really actually limits our experience of God. It limits our experience of life. And it limits the depth and the blessing and the riches that a life of prayer can actually help give us.

Eric Butterworth says – in his book, *Discover the Power within You* – that we really have not heeded the wisdom and advice that Jesus has given us in teaching us how to pray and how to use and get more

value out of it. He says that we aren't taking advantage of the power of prayer. That most of us spend time dancing around the edges of prayer, paying lip service to saying how important we think prayer is. We're dabbling in prayer, rather than diving in to the depths and the fulfillment that prayer offers us.

You know, Einstein – one of the most brilliant minds in history – absolutely believed in the power of prayer. Even though he had a scientific and empirical view of the universe and how everything worked, he absolutely believed that there was what he called “One Law.” And he said it is a force for good – that we could tap into its “infallibly perfect workings.” And the way we tap into that genius and power of the universe is through the power of thought and prayer.

Prayer really is the way to access the intelligence and wisdom of the universe! So, today, what we're going to do is look – not just at the practice of prayer – but the art of prayer to see what wisdom and insight it can give us into better utilizing this incredible gift of prayer that God has given us.

I want to focus on two Scriptures. And the first one are the first two words of the Lord's Prayer, which are, “*Our Father.*” And the second one is in the Book of Matthew, and Jesus says this: “*When you pray, to not pray like hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and the streets, where they might be seen by others. Truly, I tell you that they have received their full reward. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father – who sees what is done in secret – will reward you.*”

So the first two words of the Lord's Prayer – “*Our Father*” – really connote a lot of information and wisdom. “*Our Father*” means that we are connected to God and the Source. And “*Our Father*” means that we're connected to one another: that we all come from the same Source. And what it's really saying, when he says, “*Pray like this: Our Father,*” he's saying that prayer is a unifying activity. It brings us back into a sense of connection and oneness with the Divine; a connection and oneness with ourselves; a connection and oneness with each other. Because when you think about it, when we pray, it's because we feel disconnected! It's because we feel fragmented. And prayer brings us into a sense of oneness with the Source; oneness with ourselves; oneness with the allness and goodness and the limitless life, substance and intelligence of God.

And then when the second Scripture said, “*Pray to your Father, who is unseen.*” Remember when Jesus said, “*God is Spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth*”? “*Pray to your Father, who is unseen*” means that God is in the invisible realm. That we must go to that secret place that is invisible – that cannot be seen by anyone – because that is where the power of God resides.

It's not about show or words, but prayer is an activity of consciousness that takes place within our hearts and our minds. In that secret place – in that invisible place – where all things are made possible. Eric Butterworth calls that secret place “*a quiet, invisible place: the realm of causation.*” It is where that power is that literally makes everything possible.

I love this Scripture when it says, “*Go into your room and close the door.*” Notice it doesn't say, “*Go into someone else's room and close the door ...*” The whole idea about prayer is: no one can go to that secret place for you but you. No one can feel God for you. No one can feel a oneness with God and a connection with God for you. This is something – a secret place within us – that we have to. Only we can make that connection to the inner world.

And it says, “*Close the door,*” which means to close the door. Turn away from the outer distractions.: the distractions of the world, and also the mental distraction that we create in our lives. That that's how we pray!

You know what the two greatest sense of distractions are, that keep us from feeling united and feeling a sense of oneness with God, and going to that secret place? The first one is worry. You ever overthink or obsess about something? About when it was going to happen? How it was going to happen? Always trying to control and know every single detail? We spend a lot of time worrying about things that never

happen! The worrying about things does not get them accomplished! Remember Jesus said, *“Who, by worrying, can add a single hour to their life?”* Worry actually means “to choke off”: we choke off the flow of that connection when we worry.

The second distraction is when we are overly focused on the results. On getting what we want. Sometimes we pray thinking more of what we want than God. We seek the gift way more than the Giver! And it actually preoccupies our minds.

Butterworth says that, when we’re seeking just results only, we are actually undermining our own peace and happiness and fullness. That asking for stuff is a secondary benefit of prayer. That we miss out on the fullness of knowing the love and the joy and the wisdom and the insights of God. There is so much depth to prayer other than just getting the things we think we want.

I love that Scripture in Jeremiah when it says: *“If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart.”* Notice it doesn’t say, *“If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with half your heart.”* And the truth is: When we’re praying and thinking half about God and half what is the payoff that we want to get, then we aren’t really opening ourselves to the fullness of God. We are not giving ourselves the advantage of all the goodness and abundance and joy and wisdom that’s actually available to us, because we’re limiting and constantly focusing on just what we want.

And so, when you think about it, there’s so much more self-realization, spiritual awakenings, fulfillment and enlightenment that is available to all of us. I guarantee you, nobody that’s enlightened says, *“Hey! I pray so much you should see all the stuff I get! You should give it a try; you can get all kinds of stuff by praying!”* That is not how it is! There is insight. There’s understanding. There’s meaning and fulfillment and a sense of purpose and clarity. All these riches come from opening our hearts to a fuller and deeper level of prayer by unifying our hearts and minds in God. Going to that secret place within.

Jesus said, *“Seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.”* And what he’s saying is: Unify first! Enter that secret place first. Have your desire for God first. Make it your priority, and all these things – and so much more! – will flow into your life.

Eric Butterworth says until we earnestly seek to unify with God, and go to that secret place, that we will literally just have a superficial level of fulfillment, and not a deep and rich spiritual experience.

So the first thing to do in the “art of prayer,” is to unify ourselves in the secret place.

Now, if you owned a mountain cabin, and it had been closed all winter long, do you think you would have to beg or plead or induce the air to come in, or the sunshine to flow through? And the answer would be, *“No!”* All you would need to do is open the doors and windows and the air and the light will come in, and the cabin will be lighter and fresher and brighter!

The Bible says a lot about, similarly, it’s like opening our lives to God, and everything will be lighter and brighter. And even though the Bible says, *“Ask.”* It says, *“Ask”* a lot! It says, *“Ask and ye shall receive.”* *“Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it ...”* *“If you lack anything, ask God, who gives generously.”*

While it says a lot about asking, it also says something in Matthew 6 that I find interesting. And that is: it says, *“Your Father knows the things that you need even before you ask him.”* I’m thinking, *“Ask and ye shall receive,”* *“Whatever you ask in prayer”* ... and then it says, *“Your Father knows what you need before you ask.”* So does that mean we shouldn’t ask? That we don’t need to ask? Or maybe it means we need to look at how we ask, and what it actually means to ask! Let’s explore some different perspectives about asking.

And so the first one is to consider: How do you ask the sun for sunlight? By getting into the sunlight! How do you ask electricity to turn on the lamp? By flicking on the switch! How do you ask God for love? Well, God is love, so you just open your heart to love! How do you ask God for peace? Well, God is peace, so you just open yourself to allow peace to fill your heart and mind.

And so the question is: How do we ask God for things? And that is just to open yourself and to enter into the spirit of the thing. It's not what God can do for us; it's what we can do to allow God to flow through us!

You know, I love that Scripture when Jesus says, *"It is the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom."* And that means: All kinds of blessings and goodness await us – are available for us! – waiting for us to open ourselves and to allow it to flow through our lives! Just like opening that cabin; the air will just come right in and refresh us and uplift us.

You know, when it says, *"Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."* So how do you believe it before you've received it? And the way is: to realize that you're a powerful spiritual being. That God has placed in you built-in capacities and the fullness of the kingdom, and the riches of all good that are possible for you. And so you can begin to open up and believe, because it is already yours!

In the same way that you would have the confidence to go to the bank and withdraw the funds that are in it, because you know it's there, similarly we can – with confidence – call forth our spiritual inheritance, call forth our spiritual reserves, because we know it's already there! That we can have a level of confidence and consciousness of that abundance that exists.

You know, if you have two workers, and one of them cuts corners. And one of them would get off sick any time they could. Would leave at exactly the right time. That complained and whined about their job and people ... You could say, in a certain sense, that they're asking to be fired. They're kind of asking to not have a long employment experience with that company. And suppose you had somebody who was enthusiastic all the time. Who had a great attitude. They were willing to learn. Try new things. Spoke about the people in the company well ... You would say that they were asking for a raise, or asking for a promotion. They're asking to be in a management level.

And the point I'm trying to make is: Asking is about consciousness. Asking is about the energy that we put out there into the Universe. That we are always asking the Universe for whatever it is that we put out. If we're saying how unfair life is, and how things never work, and I'm not good enough, in a way we're asking – and really, it's more like claiming – all the things that are out there.

So the question is: How do you ask? What kind of consciousness and mindset are you putting out there? What kind of energy are you putting? Because we will keep attracting more of that stuff! Asking isn't just about saying, *"Hey, I want this."* It's about putting out the consciousness of love, of joy, of success, of abundance. You know, you ask for life by affirming how wonderful life is. You ask for success by developing a consciousness of success. You ask for peace by allowing peace to permeate your heart and your mind.

The first step in the "art of prayer" is to unify in that secret place. And the second is to ask through raising your consciousness: opening up the windows of your heart and mind, and let it be filled with God, and uplift you and attract even greater things to you.

And then the final thing is to affirm the truth about you and God. We love affirmations in Unity! *"I am prosperous!" "I am successful!" "I have a nurturing, enriching relationship!" "I have wonderful, supportive friends!" "Things always work out for me!"* And that is great, and that is powerful, and that is wonderful.

But you know what Jesus did even more? He affirmed God. He affirmed his unity with the power of God's unlimited Spirit. He affirmed how he was a light in the world. He affirmed his oneness with God. And those affirmations create a consciousness and a mindset that elevates us and makes our prayers actually easier!

So some of the things that he affirmed about himself: *"I am the light of the world." "I am the bread of life." "I am the way, the truth and the life." "I am the resurrection and the life." "The Father and I are*

one.” I mean, we could say all of those and, “I am created in the image and likeness of God.” “I am a child of God.” “I am the temple of the Living God.” The more we affirm God – and our relationship to God – it actually eases and opens the way for our prayers to attract and radiate and come towards us with even greater things.

You know, the Lord’s Prayer is a wonderful affirmation of God and our relationship to God. This is Eric Butterworth’s version that’s even more affirmative than the one that we grew up with. Here’s what he says:

*“Our Father in heaven, hallowed is Thy name;  
Thy kingdom is come  
Thy will is done in earth as it is in heaven.*

*You give us this day, and every day, our daily bread.  
You always forgive, even as we forgive.  
You would never leave us in temptation,  
But Thou art the very power of deliverance from limitation.*

*For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory  
Forever. Amen.”*

The thing I like about that prayer is: Listen to the mindset of that prayer. “*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom is come.*” Think of the awareness and the understanding and the consciousness of that prayer! That’s what Jesus was always affirming! More than affirming what he wanted, he was affirming who he was, who God is, and his relationship with God. Our relationship with God.

I ask you: if we had two people, and one prayed only by affirming and asking for exactly what they wanted, and the other one just was seeking awareness and a connection of God, and would pray for the highest and best, who would be happier and more fulfilled after 40 years? I have to answers. The first one is: I don’t know. The second one is: that I believe that, the more we just keep asking only for what we want, we limit the fullness of the experience of God and life that we could really have. That, when we are seeking an awareness of the presence of God, and the allness of God – that when we are praying for the highest and best go be done – I believe we open ourselves to be channels of wisdom and light and genius and beauty and goodness and, yes! Including the things that we want and need and desire.

This week, I really encourage you to think about your prayer life! And I want you to explore and experiment with these three perspective on prayer: unifying in the secret place; ask by raising your consciousness; and affirm the truth about God and yourself. I encourage you to do yourself a favor and not just focus on the practice of prayer, but on the “art” of prayer.

God bless you all!

## **SOLO**

***Guest artist Cerise Patron sings her original song, “Rising Up”***

The fear kept me down for too long  
Afraid to take a step, scared of being wrong  
Oh, but every leap of faith let me right where I belong  
So I’m ready; I’m ready

So I’m rising, rising up  
With my wings spread, I’m opening up  
Oh, I am here for a grand adventure ready to show up  
So I’m rising, rising up

Stepping into the cave I fear most  
Darkness all around, braving the unknown  
And where I'll go next heaven only knows  
But I am ready; I'm ready

So I'm rising, rising up  
With my wings spread, I'm opening up  
Oh, I am here for a grand adventure ready to show up  
So I'm rising, rising up

And like a web of love, I spread my light  
As I own my life, the fire ignites the world  
Ohhhh!

And together we're rising up  
With our wings spread, we're opening up  
Oh, we are here for a grand adventure, ready to show up  
So we are rising, rising up

Yes, together we're rising up  
Oh we are rising, rising up

#### **OFFERING**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offering. Our offering blessing is: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."*

And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts, these tithes, and these offerings. We know they are given in love, they are received in love, and that they move through this ministry with the energy of Divine Love out into the world as good. And that each giver is blessed – heaped up, pressed down and overflowing – for that is the Law. Thank you, God! Amen.

#### **CLOSING**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** We're so grateful you could be with us here online. We hope you've enjoyed our music and our meditation and our message. And now will you join me in affirming our Prayer for Protection?

The light of God surrounds us;  
The love of God enfolds us;  
The power of God protects us;  
The presence of God watches over us.  
Wherever we are, God is. And all is well!

And now let's enjoy the choir singing the Peace Song. Have a blessed week!

#### **Choir sings Peace Song:**

Let there be peace on earth  
And let it begin with me!  
Let there be peace on earth  
The peace that was meant to be!

With God as Creator  
Family all are we!

Let us walk with each other  
In perfect harmony!

Let peace begin with me;  
Let this be the moment now!  
With every breath I take  
Let this be my joyous vow:  
To take each moment and live each moment  
In peace eternally!

Let there be peace on earth  
And let it begin with me!

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