

WHY PRAY?

Unity World Day of Prayer Opening Prayer Service

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Rev. Richard Rogers

Okay; so here's the question for tonight: Why do you pray?

And that assumes, I guess, that you do pray. [Congregation laughs] You know, many of us started our prayer life kind of as the "9-1-1" prayer. You know, we're about to hit the wall -- whatever the wall was - - and our prayer is right before the glass starts to shatter: "*God help me!*"

And for many of us, we spend a lot of time in wanting prayer to fix bad choices. Anybody ever been in that place? [Congregant: "*Yup!*"] Where we make some really interesting choices, and then we're hoping that prayer at the 11th hour and the 45th minute comes in and saves us from our bad choices.

You know, whatever it takes to start on our spiritual life, it is absolutely an appropriate place to start. But tonight, I want to take a little deeper dive into this activity that we call prayer. Because I think there is a deep, human hunger that will not be satisfied with anything less than prayer. I think there's a deep spiritual hunger in our world today, and that we're trying all kinds of ways to satisfy it -- to quench that thirst; to fill that hole; to meet that need -- that is an activity that prayer was designed to heal from the beginning.

There are two things that I think are promised if we choose to live a spiritual life. The first thing is that the spiritual life promises us a deeper connection with God. That it's a promise! That as you live the spiritual life, that you will feel more connected to the Divine. You will feel, not only more connected to the Divine, but you will feel and know yourself in a place of oneness with God. And that, as we live our spiritual life, we actually feel more and more connected; we feel more and more one with all that God is.

And the other promise from living the spiritual life is that life will change. But that it will get better. That truly, deeply living the spiritual life, that your life will get better in ways that you can't even imagine at the beginning of the journey.

And for me, one of the ways that life gets better through a spiritual life is a level of peace that is phenomenal. That many of us come into the spiritual life living from a place of anxiety and fear. And there's a promise that, if we move into this activity that we call prayer -- if we deepen our spiritual life; if we know more God -- then we can get to a place where we can live in a level of peace that is so deep and so satisfying that our soul is still.

Jesus said, "*In the world there is tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.*"

He didn't say that stuff doesn't happen! [Congregation laughs] Right? I mean, he was pretty clear that in the world: It is designed to rock the boat. It is designed to rock your boat! That we can pray for a still, calm, peaceful life ... but I don't see any great spiritual teachers living that. I see what great spiritual teachers do is: They live the ups and downs with such a deep sense of peace. That it's not about this [waves hands around to indicate the external]. It's about this [points to his heart]. That they have found God within themselves and they are at peace with that.

So as I was thinking about this talk, I thought: "What are the reasons we pray?" And I came up with 15 right off the top of my head, and I had to stop! I thought, "I can't get through 15 in a talk! We'll be here all night!" [Congregation laughs] But I do want to share these 15. And somebody set the timer!

I think the greatest benefit -- or one of the greatest benefits -- of prayer is that **PRAYER ALLOWS YOU TO REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE.** That you are a child of God. That you were created in the image and

likeness of God. And through the activity of prayer, as we go to God over and over again, all the illusions that we have believed about ourselves -- all the ways that we have felt less than and broken -- are dissolved. And we begin to see ourselves in the light of our divine nature.

Paul said, "*Now I see in the mirror dimly, but one day I will see face to face.*" That prayer takes us from our broken, wounded image of ourselves and allows us to see the glory of God staring back at us. That we truly were created in the image and likeness of God. That we are divine in nature.

For me, the second reason we pray is that **IT HELPS FOCUS OUR MIND**. That, for many of us, our mind can be a pretty scary place with the level of fear and anxiety that we know. Through the activity of prayer, we actually focus our mind on God and not all on the scary thoughts that we sometimes dwell in.

Three: **PRAYER GIVES US A CONNECTION**. It gives us a connection with God; it gives us a connection with ourselves; it even gives us a deeper connection with others. There's something about praying for someone that allows us to see the truth of who they are. Many times in our lives we see each other from our frailties or our concerns or our brokenness. But through the activity of prayer, we begin to see each other from the highest point of view. As you pray for another -- as you really pray for another -- you begin to see them the way God sees them. You begin to see them as a divine expression: holy and sacred and amazing. And it's like we get to see them the way God created them from the beginning. That many times, we get bitter about life. And we see the people around us as broken or "less than," and we get disillusioned with life.

And I really believe that when we're in that place, it is because we have not spent enough time praying for others. And the activity of praying for others -- it actually allows us to see them in a higher, greater, more powerful point of view.

And so my question for you tonight is: Who are you praying for? Are you praying for anybody? Are you praying for your family? Are you praying for friends? Are you praying for neighbors? Because I believe that praying for others heals us.

One of the basic spiritual principles is: As I give, so shall I receive. And when you make a commitment with someone in need or someone who is going through a challenge or a healing or a problem in their life, and you truly make a commitment to pray for them, it really does impact the quality of their life! But even more, it impacts the quality of your life. Because you've invested in someone else's spiritual life. And that comes back to bless you over and over again.

PRAYER EXPANDS OUR SENSE OF GRATITUDE. As we pray, there is an overwhelming sense of gratitude for all the blessings that we have been given. Through the activity of prayer, we begin to see all the things that our ego doesn't always show us. We begin to see the little moments and little activities and little miracles and all the divine blessings that often go unnoticed.

One of the other reasons -- number five -- for me that I talked about a few weeks ago is **THE ACTIVITY OF SEEKING WISDOM**. That I think one of the greatest prayers for all of us is the prayer of asking for wisdom in our life. Not knowledge; wisdom. Knowledge is knowing the facts. Wisdom is asking for the wisdom to know how to use the facts in the greatest possible way to move your life forward; to improve the quality of your life; to use the knowledge that you have in the greatest way to live the best life.

See, I believe that we need more wisdom in our world today. That we have lots of technology; we know lots of things. We know how many calories to eat. We know how many cigarettes to smoke.

[Congregation laughs] We know a lot of things! But we don't always have the wisdom to execute it very well. We need to pray for wisdom.

We need to pray and **TO SEEK TRANSFORMATION**, especially in the places where we feel the most stuck. We need to be praying for transformation. We need to be praying for transformation, first and foremost, within ourselves, but then all the other situations in our life that we know are not at the highest level of good. We need to be praying for transformation in our relationships; in our work; in our families; in our community; in our government. We need to be praying for transformation.

Now, it may not be the transformation that you're asking for. [Laughs] Sometimes when we pray for transformation, the transformation is much different than we think that we want or need. But as we pray for transformation, we are actually praying for the wisdom of God to transform it in the best way, not my way. And there's something powerful when you seek and you offer every aspect of your life up to be transformed. That any aspect of your life that isn't fulfilling the greatest level of good, as you seek transformation at that level, it's amazing the transformations that we can experience.

Seven: **THROUGH PRAYER, WE NEED TO BE SEEKING GUIDANCE**. And for me, guidance is a little different than wisdom. Guidance is the details. Like, *"Just tell me what to do right now, God. Tell me right now; give me the exact next step."* And sometimes we don't think God can handle that level of detail. [Congregation laughs] Like God's a "big picture" God. In my experience, if you really pray and you seek guidance, that level of minute detail is forthcoming! That if you ask for God to guide you in every moment of every day -- if you really seek that level of guidance; if you can let go of that level of control and ask God's help in every minute of every day -- that level of guidance is forthcoming.

But that level of guidance actually challenges our ego's need to be in control. So oftentimes, the only time we ask for guidance is the "big picture" things. *"Alright, God, I'll give you that one, because I can't figure that one out"* instead of just saying, *"Every day in every way, God, guide me; guide me; guide me; guide me; guide me!"*

Eight: **FORGIVENESS -- BOTH ASKING FOR IT AND ASKING THAT WE KNOW HOW TO DO IT**. Have you ever had a situation that has been difficult for you to forgive? Right? There's a role in prayer for that. Because sometimes we get so wounded by life: by other people's disappointments or their behaviors or their actions. We get so wounded by life that even when we know it would be better for us to forgive, we don't forgive.

But then when we pray, and say, *"God, I need help. Because my personality -- my humanity -- does not want to forgive this. I do not want to let this go. You know what I think of that person. And it is not that they are a child of God."* [Congregation laughs] Right? And there's moments where we have to pray to forgive! Where we have to pray to forgive.

And nine: **GRACE**. I believe that one of the most powerful prayers that we pray is to ask for the Grace of God. The Grace of God to walk us through difficult times; the Grace of God to walk with us through loss and grief and suffering and the hardships of life. And we need to ask for the Grace of God to go before us, because God's Grace is greater than we can do on our own. God's Grace will walk with us through any situation. That in the moment where you feel like you can't do it anymore, that is the moment where we need to be praying for Grace. Because with God, we can do it. God can open doors and heal things that we can't even imagine.

Ten: **HEALING**. Every day I believe that we need to be praying for healing. Every day! The little things; the big things; I think we need to be praying for healing all the time.

Eleven: **COMMUNITY**. I think we need to be praying for our neighborhoods, our world. I think we need to be praying for the transformation of our planet.

Twelve: **SELF-REALIZATION**. The prayer that we be spiritually awakened to the glory of God and know, not only who we are, but to be the shining example of all that God is.

Thirteen: **LOVE AND COMPASSION.** The prayer, *"Make me the most loving, compassionate expression of life that I can be."*

Fourteen is **FAITH.**

And 15 is **PEACE.**

So here's what I want you to look at for a moment. I want you to imagine that this is the realm of thought. [Draws a square on the easel paper and labels it "Thought."] Right? And in the realm of thought, everything is busy. [Fills the box with random squiggles] Thoughts are going a million miles an hour. And what I want you to see is that, at this level of life, there's not a lot of peace.

[Draws another box beneath the "Thought" box and labels it "God."] This is the level of God. And what I find amazing in prayer is that I can actually touch this [points to the God box] and still be afraid. And I want you to see the difference there. Because it sounds kind of like, *"Well, how can you experience God and still be afraid?"*

Well, as we begin to use the power of prayer, we realize that this activity is always going on. [Points to the "Thought" box] The anxiety; the fear; the thoughts; the busy-ness of our mind is always going on! But at this level [points to the "God" box] there is a level of peace and knowing and wisdom and goodness that is so much deeper than this. And that we can actually hold both! That you can feel your mind and the anxiety of your mind, but that you can also hold the depth of the peace that's within you.

Tonight, we're going to spend some time in prayer. Now that I've talked about it enough, we're going to spend some time in prayer. And before we do that, I've got one more thing I want you to do. I want you to share a prayer that you would like someone would like to pray with you with someone sitting close to you. I want you to have a prayer for you. And for the next 24 hours, I want you to have a prayer that you're holding for someone else. Does that make sense? So for the next 24 hours, I want you to have the prayer that you're holding for you, and a prayer that you're holding for someone else.

Now, what's the benefit of having a prayer for somebody else? Well, can you imagine that you're going to have more faith for them than they have for themselves? Like, when they share their prayer, they might even be a little embarrassed. They might want to whisper, *"Well, here it is!"* [Congregation laughs] Right? And you're not going to go into doubt! You're not going to go into fear for them! They're going to share their prayer, and you're going to go, *"Oh, yeah; God can handle that!"* And you're going to be able to pray for them in a way that sometimes we can't pray for ourselves.

So are you ready? In about 30 seconds, this room's going to go into chaos for a second. [Congregation laughs] Alright? We'll be okay. I want you to find some other child of God and I want you to share your prayer with them, and I want you to listen for their prayer. And make a commitment to that soul that you're going to be in prayer for them for the next 24 hours.

Now, do you have to share your deepest, darkest prayer? Well, it'd be more fun, right? [Congregation laughs] But you don't have to, right? You just have to share a prayer with another child of God. Ready; set; go!

[Room fills with conversations between congregants]

Okay. That's too much information! [Congregation laughs] They don't need to know that much! Alright; let's move into prayer. Let's do it now.

For the next 24 hours, we made a commitment to another child of God to hold them in prayer. To see whatever they've asked for from the highest point of view. To hold them in the light. To surround them in love. And to see God at work. To see God at work!

One of the most powerful things -- one of the greatest gifts that we give each other -- is our acts of faith. To believe for each other in a way that's greater than we can believe for ourselves.

So tonight, we have a soul connection with somebody else. And we may know them really, really well. Or we may not know them at all. But our soul has said, "Yes!" to being of assistance to their soul; to lifting them higher than they can do on their own.

And Jesus said, "*Where two or more are gathered, there am I in the midst of them.*" So in your commitment to pray for another, there's a third that steps in. For the third is the Divine. It's not just the words or the thoughts that you think; it's your commitment to be an instrument for God. And the presence of Jesus is there, inviting you both to go higher. To play at his level of life. To know the truth and to allow the truth to set you free.

"I see you. I see you whole and complete. I see you divine and fully expressing all that God is. And for the next 24 hours, I will see you from God's point of view."

In the name and through the power of the Living Christ, we give thanks. And so it is. Amen.

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