



TALKING With *God*

By the Rev. Arden W. Mead

Introduction

Praying is one dimension of being in love—being in love with God. The metaphor of a love affair may prove helpful to you.

A right relationship with God involves falling madly in love with God and nurturing that love to grow and mature.

To pray to God is to speak freely and intimately to God within the security of that loving relationship. The conversations of a love affair comprise the content of prayer.

How do you define prayer? You don't need to.

A lot of religious matters seem to be “carved in stone,” as they say. There's only one right answer, one right way to do something—period.

But, prayer isn't like that. Who can do it, how it can be done, where you can pray, what you pray for—that's for the one praying to decide.

Taking a Glimpse

Let's take a glimpse into God's Word, converse with Him, and reflect upon His invitation to lovingly converse with Him through prayer.

As for the One being prayed to—“He (Jesus) said to them, ‘When you pray, say: “Father,...”’ (Luke 11:2a).

Talking with God

Lord, is it all right if I just sort of
talk to You like this?
I mean, I'm not even sure
how to address You because—
I'm not used to talking with a God.

I'd feel strange saying,
"Your Majesty" or "Your Holiness"
(although those names are appropriate enough).
But those words would make You seem
far away—
and terrifying.
It would feel like talking to a volcano
or an atomic bomb
or my boss
or the principal
or a judge who knows I'm guilty.

Sometimes You seem like all of those to me.

Sometimes I think You are those things.
But when I pray to You,
I need to see something gentler,
kinder, wiser.

I'm told that Jesus taught His followers to call You "Father."
That helps.
I think of my own dad—
(And I realize that for some people
the idea of a dad may not be a pleasant one.
I'm sorry for them,
and I'm glad for them that You
are what all fathers are
supposed to be.)

I like the fact Father is a human term,
because that's all that I am
and, yet, the God of all ages of
time who whirls solar systems
and universes around has made
Himself known to me in a word I understand—"Father."
I expected something more difficult.

Reflecting on Prayer

Even though God has presented Himself to us in the image of a father, as well as with other gentle and reassuring images such as "Shepherd," "King," "Friend," we still may not be eager to pray to Him. That reluctance is because of what we think we're like, rather than what we think God is like.

Taking a Glimpse

"How precious to me are Your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!" (Psalm 139:17).

Talking with God

Father, it's strange enough
to think of You in human terms,
but even stranger still to realize
that You are thinking of me.

What do You think of me?
I have the feeling Your attitude
toward me is one of love
(that just seems to go along
with the idea of Father).

Which leads me to conclude
that You see me as a child—
Your child.

After all, You created me and,
in spite of my occasional complaints,
You did a superb job.
You also made everything else—
the good things, that is,
and gave them to me to use.

There are things like
food and clothing,
health and shelter,
work to do,
pleasure,
other people.

You made and gave to me not only things,
but procedures and processes, too:
the turning of the world to make
sunrise and sunset,
the mystery of plants growing
from seed,
the wonder of pregnancy,
elements, molecules, gravity,
magnetism, heat, digestion,
breathing, memory.

All of that—
for me.
That tells me that You spend
more time being concerned
about me—
and lovingly so —
than I spend thinking about You.

Does it bother You, Father,
that people like me too often take
You for granted?
Or that people like me use some
of what You've given
in the wrong way?
to cheat and lie?
to hate and judge?
to desire and take?

And, then, I'm reminded that even for
that You've given us a process that saves.
Jesus Christ died on the cross
for me. You forgive me, Father,
because of Him.

And I am a child just born in Your eyes.
Perfect again.

Reflecting on Prayer

Sometimes prayer comes down to a matter of our saying something and then standing back waiting for God's answer to happen. We anticipate God's response as something like an explosion—sudden and dramatic—or something like a slow burning candle—obvious, but tending toward the ordinary. The idea is that the effect of our prayer is something that takes place outside ourselves. We ask for it and then sit back and watch it happen. In fact, others should be able to see it, too. What *really* happens, though, is often noticeable only to ourselves and God.

Taking a Glimpse

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:7-11).

Talking with God

Does anything happen when I talk to You?
It's hard for me to imagine that
You're just sitting up there in
heaven with nothing on Your
mind and nothing special to do until someone down here puts in
an order and asks for something
to be done or given.

That's not the way it works, is it?
Of course, it isn't.
And I think I already knew that,

because when people pray,
“Hallowed be Thy Name,”
Your Name continues to be holy,
just as it has always been holy
and always will be holy, whether
we consider it holy or not, or say
that it is or it isn't.

“
And when people pray,
Thy kingdom come,”
You don't begin at that moment
to first send it. You promised it
would be here a long time ago.
They say it came in the Person of
Jesus Christ. You didn't wait
until we asked for it.

And when people pray,
“Thy will be done on earth as it
is in heaven,” I suspect You get
done *what* You want done *when*
You want it done and *where* You
want it done, even if nobody
gives You permission by asking
it to be done.

Come to think of it,
You even give “daily bread” to
people who never even would
think to ask You for it because
they don't realize where it
comes from.

So what's going on?
Does praying really change anything?
It has changed me.
To pray to You has made me
think about You for a change
(something I haven't done for a
long time, and I'm sorry I haven't).
That's significant.

Praying has led me to come up with a picture of You
and led me to understand what I
am like, and it's made me think
about everything I have in this
world—where it comes from, and
why I've got it.

That's a change, Father.
But Jesus' prayer goes further.
“
And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass
against us.” When I ask for that—
something definitely happens.
I am forgiven.
So are the people who hurt me.
And by following Your example, I
can restore a broken relationship.
This forgiveness You asked us to
pray about—
it’s not something new, is it?

You promised it to Your world, to Your children
all through the centuries.

And You made Your promise
good when You sent Your Son,
our Savior, Jesus Christ,
into our world.
He lived perfectly.
He died once on behalf of all of us.
He rose again and draws us after
Him into heaven.

That’s the promise You kept. That’s why I know
I’m forgiven. That’s why I know something
happens when I pray.

And I can trust You in everything
else, too. So I can pray the rest of
Jesus’ prayer: “And lead us not into
temptation, but deliver us from
evil,” and be confident that You’ll
come through on those concerns,
too. Like a loving Father, You’ll
never do what is bad for me.
Like a protective Father, You’ve
made me safe from whatever
Satan thinks he might be able to
get away with.
(Some creatures are that confused—
they don’t know whose world this is!)

There’s a lot going on when I pray.
Most of it goes on even when I’m not
praying. So I’m the thing that changes
through prayer.

My attitude changes as I remember
who I am—Your child,
beloved, cared for,
but still a child.
And since children don’t always
know as much as they think they
do and usually can do much less
than they try to do,

they need a loving father to
provide them with all that is best
for them.

Help me put the stress in my prayer
where it belongs;
on *You*, not me,
and then to trust You for all the
rest of what I need and some of
what I want that You would like
me to have.

(I've never said anything like that before, Father.
So if talking with You like this
can make that much of a change in me,
then prayer really works, doesn't it?
It's something far more powerful than
I had thought.)

Reflecting on Prayer

One of the words people in the church use to define what they do when they pray is the word “petition.” It means *asking for something*. It's what most of us think prayer is for, a way to ask God for something. And it is that—as well as many other things.

It is possible to feel comfortable asking God for anything at all, no matter how trivial. Most people consider prayer to be a matter of some significance since it is the way frail, limited and imperfect human beings call on the all-powerful, infinite and perfect God. Therefore, we assume, prayer should be used for important matters only.

Taking a Glimpse

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

Talking with God

When I talk to You like this, Father,
what am I supposed to say?
I have the feeling that when people pray, most of what they do is ask
You for things. Is that okay?
It must be.
After all, You said we should ask and
You're the One who has everything
there is to give.
So it simply makes sense to ask
You for the things we need,

instead of asking anyone else.
(Notice I just said “things we
need,” but what was in my mind
was things I *want*.)

There is a difference, isn't there?
One seems right and appropriate, and the other seems
more self-oriented.
Is it possible for me, child of Yours
that I am, to tell the difference
between things I *need* and things
I *want*?

I'm sure that You know which is which.
So, is it necessary that I know?
(I sense that it is.)

Maybe the clue is in those two special
words in Your invitation—
“with thanksgiving.” I know it
would make a difference in the way
I ask if I did so with the
awareness of all that You've already
given. I think it also would make a
difference in what I ask for
if I realized that almost all I have
consists of things I never asked
for, but You gave me anyway.

My needs should be simple:
food, clothing, shelter, other
people. Your forgiveness,
Your presence.

That is to say—all You've
already provided.

My list of wants should have
those same things at the top.
Then I'll be genuinely praying for
“Thy will” to be done
in me. I will be wanting the same things You want.
And I'll be able to thank You for
them because they'll be the things
You've already provided.

And that's why I don't have to worry, isn't it?

Reflecting on Prayer

Certain kinds of prayer are obvious such as a large group of people standing side by side in a church on Sunday morning, reciting or reading in unison some words addressed to God.

Equally obvious as prayer is a child kneeling beside a bed, hands folded, eyes closed.

Not so obvious is a man in a doctor's office, waiting for the doctor to come back with some test results; or a lady in a garden, whistling a hymn softly as she pulls weeds; or a hiker in the back country, pausing to look across a valley to a waterfall shrouded in mist, and feeling calmed by the beautiful sight.

Taking a Glimpse

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

I've noticed, Father, that some people
fold their hands when they pray,
and some don't.
Some fold their arms;
some clasp their hands behind
their back;
some put a hand to their eyes.

I've seen pictures of people
waving their arms
or just lifting them as if something
from heaven was about to fall into
their upturned hands.
Some people close their eyes;
some kneel.

All of that probably means
that what I do with my hands
or my eyes
doesn't really make much difference
(unless I had a good reason
to pray with a certain gesture).
If it helps me concentrate—
concentrate on *You*—
then it's good to do.
If it's a way to get noticed,
then it's probably not good to do.

Some people pray out loud
in church, for instance.
Some pray before they eat (and
sometimes after, too).
Children are taught to pray
when they go to bed.

All of that is obvious to somebody
watching. But the psalm writer
mentioned “thoughts,”
and that made me wonder.
Can a prayer have no words?
Can I simply think of things
and be praying?

I need to find a time, Father,
when I can do that;
think—
meditate—
consider—
sense Your presence—
listen.

Do You still hear me
when I can’t find the words?
haven’t said, “Thee” or “Thou”
or “Thy” or “Thine”
in a long time.
My grammar isn’t perfect;
my sentences are incomplete
(I start one and then rush off
to start another one that the first
one suggested to me).

A father understands when a child has
something to say
but doesn’t know how to say it.

With words, a thought, a pleasant feeling,
I’ll talk to You, Father.

It doesn’t matter how.
What matters is that
You’re listening.

Reflecting on Prayer

When Christians get together to worship, they find comfort and strength in their relationships with each other. It’s a good feeling to be surrounded by people who accept the same truths, experience the same failings, and try with the same mixed results to love God and each other better every day. When such a group prays together, they express a common need.

At the same time, a group of God’s people praying together is still a collection of individuals. Although they may all say the same words at the same instant, each of them is making a personal contact with his or her Father. That personal experience can happen in a group setting, or it can be something that comes in a private moment, when only God is around.

Taking a Glimpse

“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” (Matthew 6:6).

Talking with God

In some ways, talking with You
is a personal thing.
No one else can do what I might
want done;
no one else is responsible for
giving me whatever I'm
thankful for;
no one else has on his or her mind
what's on mine.

I understand why Jesus said
it's a good idea to pray in private.
The opposite of that
would be to show off,
to let other people think I'm much
more holy than they are
(or more holy than they thought
I was) because of the way I openly
talk to You.

But I notice that even Your
Son, Jesus, tried to get away
from it all to be by Himself
and talk with You privately.

If I manage to do it right,
there doesn't necessarily
have to be a focus or even
a progression
in what I think or say.
My mind can wander
from subject
to subject and back again.
All of it is an experience of being
close to You.
That's what prayer is.

Taking a Glimpse

“My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the Lord” (Psalm 26:12).

Talking with God

So is what happens in church,
when they pray together
out loud not showing off.

It seems something very nice to do.
I listen to them, sometimes,
and I notice they pray for others a lot,
even for the ones who aren't there—
especially for the ones who aren't there.

Together they seem to consider
what individually they might not
have considered—
because they didn't know that
somebody is sick,
somebody is about to die.
There are lonely people around;
there are people around who have
given up, old people who are
poor, old people who are
frightened, families with problems,
amilies happy about weddings,
anniversaries,
“thank yous” of a dozen kinds
to be given—
all of which is not to mention
prayers for peace and
for wise leaders.

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It's just the opposite of selfish,
not at all showing off.

Praying together is a demonstration
of care;
one of the values in it, I suppose,
is everyone's confident assumption
(a correct one)
that You care, too.

Reflecting on Prayer

God is in control of all that happens. This is not the same thing as saying that God makes everything happen. He is the author of good things, not of evil. It is God who can make something good come out of something evil.

He brings good out of evil in His response to our prayers for help. His answer may not come in a flash of light and a loud roll of thunder. Instead, He may respond to our petition for help and deliverance from evil by strengthening us to trust in Him so to endure whatever comes our way.

Taking a Glimpse

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

Talking with God

There’s still a problem, Father.
Based on my own experience—
and from what I’ve heard and seen
in other people’s lives—
I’m not sure praying really works.

Don’t get me wrong.
I realize (thankfully)
that You’ve given me a lot
of things I asked for
(without my deserving them),
and many things I never asked for,
and many things I didn’t know
I needed.

That’s not the problem.
It’s what I asked for,
but never got.
I assume You heard
and cared,
but chose not to let me have
whatever it was.

Are You telling me to be patient?
Children don’t do that very well.

But who am I to be telling You the schedule.
I sense it should be enough
to be able to ask and to do so
with the understanding
about “Thy will,” etc.
If it is not Your will that I have
what I asked for,
then give me patience
and keep me trusting in You.

And yet—
I wonder why, Father.
By this point in our relationship,
I don’t think it’s presumptuous
to ask, “Why?”

Children ask that all the time.
And their parents, their teachers (and their God)
always find it hard to give an answer
in a way that a child
can understand.

That's how I see Your answer to
St. Paul, "My grace is all you need."
(That's a better answer than "because.")
It's true, even though
I still ask, "Why?"
Your grace is all I need.
It should be enough to know
You love me,
and that Your loving me
is demonstrated in my possessing
all I need,
and that being forgiven
enables me to forgive others
I know.

It should be enough to know You
will raise the dead,
and that the resurrection
is the one thing that will help me
when I die.
"Your grace is all I need."
It's strong because it comes from a
father and gives hope to a child—me.

Reflecting on Prayer

Prayer begins with God. If He did not exist, there would be neither a reason to pray nor any hope of being heard. Prayer also ends with God. Once we have committed ourselves to His will, the matters about which we pray are out of our hands.

God has anticipated every need we encounter in this life and provided a means of satisfying that need. In some cases that satisfaction of need can come through the created order—for example, plants and animals providing us with food. In other cases, the satisfying of a need comes through acts of kindness and help performed by God's people. Understanding how God answers prayer, then, can be a matter of knowing where to look for His response. Beyond the petitions for help we should sense the deeper dimension of prayer, the process by which we declare our dependence on God and express our trust that His intentions toward us are only good. That declaration is a confession that He is our Father and we are His children.

The Lord's Prayer

It is in that spirit we can pray for all things through the prayer You taught us to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy Name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses as we
forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom
and the power
and the glory
forever and ever.
Amen.

Conclusion

In Psalm 8 God led the writer to pen that He, God, had ordained (designed, given as a gift) praise to silence the foe and the avenger. For when we are praising God, Satan cannot speak.

Prayer is communion with God. The value of prayer is prayer! To ask if prayer works is to misunderstand the nature of the experience. It's like asking, "Does love work?" or "What do you get out of talking to the one you love?"

In our conversations with God, we need not be preoccupied with the logistics, language and organization of our concerns. We need only speak to God with absolute candor and a total lack of inhibition. Prayer is an invitation to speak to the One who loves us beyond measure about anything and everything in our lives. We can come before Him in any way and in every way, without fearing His rejection of us or a diminishment in His compassion for us.

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