

Rotheiser: Praying when we don't know how

He taught us how to pray while not knowing how to pray. That's a comment sometimes made about Henri Nouwen.

It seems almost contradictory to say that. How can someone teach us to pray when he himself doesn't know how? Well, two complexities conspired together here. Henri Nouwen was a unique mixture of weakness, honesty, complexity, and faith. That also describes prayer, this side of eternity. Nouwen simply shared, humbly and honestly, his own struggles with prayer and in seeing his struggles, the rest of us learned a lot about how prayer is precisely this strange mixture of weakness, honesty, complexity, and faith.

Prayer, as we know, has classically been defined as "the lifting of mind and heart to God", and given that our minds and hearts are pathologically complex, so too will be our prayer. It will give voice not just to our faith but also to our doubt. Moreover, in the Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul tells us that when we do not know how to pray, God's Spirit, in groans too deep for words, prays through us. I suspect that we don't always recognize all the forms that takes, how God sometimes prays through our groans and our weaknesses.

The renowned preacher Frederick Buechner, speaks of something he calls "crippled prayers that are hidden inside our minor blasphemes" and are uttered through clenched teeth: "God help us!" "Jesus Christ!" "For God's sake!" These are prayers? Why not? If prayer is lifting mind and heart to God, isn't this what's in our mind and heart at that moment? Isn't there a brutal honesty in this? Jacques Loew, one of the founders of the Worker-Priest movement in France, shares how, while working in a factory, he would sometimes be working with a group men loading heavy bags onto a truck. Occasionally one of the men would accidentally drop one of the bags which would split open leaving a mess and a mini-blaspheme would spring forth from the man's lips. Loew, partly seriously and partly in jest, points out that while the man was not exactly saying the Lord's Prayer, he was invoking the name of God in real honesty.

So, is this in fact a genuine modality of prayer or is this taking the Lord's name in vain? Is this something we should be confessing as a sin rather than claiming as a prayer?

The commandment to not take the name of God in vain has little to do with those mini- blasphemes that slip out between clenched teeth when we drop a bag of groceries, jam a finger painfully, or get caught in a frustrating traffic jam. What we utter then may well be aesthetically offensive, in bad taste, and disrespectful enough of others so that some sin lies within it, but that's not taking the name of God in vain. Indeed, there's nothing false about it at all.

In some ways it's the opposite of what the commandment has in mind.

We tend to think of prayer far too piously. It is rarely unadulterated altruistic praise issuing forth from a focused attention that's grounded in gratitude and in an awareness of God. Most of the time our prayer is a very adulterated reality – and all the more honest and powerful because of that.

For instance, one of our great struggles with prayer is that it's not easy to trust that prayer makes a difference. We watch the evening newscasts, see the entrenched polarization, bitterness, hatred, self-interest, and hardness of heart that are seemingly everywhere, and we lose heart. How do we find the heart to pray in the face of this? What, inside of our prayer, is going to change any of this?

While it is normal to feel this way, we need this important reminder: *prayer is most important and most powerful precisely when we feel it is most hopeless – and we are most helpless.*

Why is this true? It's true because it's only when we are finally empty of ourselves, empty of our own plans and our own strength that we're in fact ready to let God's vision and strength flow into the world through us. Prior to feeling this helplessness and hopelessness, we are still identifying God's power too much with the power of health, politics, and economics that we see in our world; and are identifying hope with the optimism we feel when the news looks a little better on a given night. If the news looks good, we have hope; if not, why pray? But we need to pray because we trust in God's strength and promise, not because the newscasts on a given night offer a bit more promise.

Indeed, the less promise our newscasts offer and the more they make us aware of our personal helplessness, the more urgent and honest is our prayer. We need to pray precisely because we are helpless and precisely because it does seem hopeless. Inside of that we can pray with honesty, perhaps even through clenched teeth.