

THREE PRAYERS YOU'LL WANT TO PRAY: AN INTRODUCTION

Why would you want to pray these three particular prayers? Did I pull them at random from the *Gigantic Book of Prayers, Meditations, and Related Items*? No—and that book has not been published.

Here are some of the reasons I chose these three prayers. I like them. I love them. They challenge me. They give me a sense of hope. They speak of God's unconditional love and of my own responsibility in the world. They direct me to works of justice and mercy. One of the prayers grounds me in a history of God's liberation and points me to the unfolding future of God's love. Another of these prayers reminds me in very pointed ways that I am not in charge of the universe and that I have responsibility to know myself, especially what motivates me, better. The third prayer connects me with people around the world and throughout history. So I pray them. Some days the words flow. Other days the words struggle to have voice. I am no expert in prayer. I would not trust anyone who claimed to be an expert in prayer because such a claim is arrogant and the opposite of prayer. I am an ordinary person who tries to live

with an awareness of God's unconditional love for all people, and I pray in that spirit.

The first prayer comes from a diplomat. The second prayer comes from a theologian. The third prayer comes from a rabbi. Stick with those identifications for a bit. Any other identification begins to load a little baggage onto this introduction.

A diplomat, a theologian, and a rabbi—that sounds like the beginning of a joke. Maybe they walk into a bar or they meet at the Orange Diamond Casino or they are on a faltering airplane with only two parachutes remaining among the three. Many people carry stereotypes of rabbis, theologians, and diplomats. Perhaps the most common stereotype is that of the diplomat in cutaway jacket and striped pants at a formal reception. Or that of a black homburg-wearing rabbi who asks questions in response to other questions. We may imagine theologians in their ivory towers, out of touch with the everyday.

I'd like to consider what a rabbi, a theologian, and a diplomat might have in common, especially their common best attributes. They have principles, and they take positions based on those principles. They understand a higher purpose in life or perhaps we may call it a deeper purpose in life. They respect other people. They affirm that other people also have a deeper purpose in life. Rabbi, theologian, diplomat: at their best they evoke our best and our deeper purpose. When that happens, these three show us new dimensions of life, new directions and perspectives.

Rabbi, theologian, and diplomat: they do not defend the old way of living, but point us to an unfolding revelation of divine intent for the world. They speak of the departure of the old order and the coming of the new. Rabbi, theologian, and diplomat demonstrate wisdom attributed to multiple sources: when faced with two choices, choose the third option.

When I think of rabbi, theologian, and diplomat, I also think that one attribute the three persons share is that they hold much information in confidence. They do not keep secrets for the sake of blackmail or for the sake of gossip. Rather, the stories and information they know become part of the solution to questions and problems they face later. When we read and use these prayers, we will first see language that seems general; the more often each prayer is read or prayed, however, the more specific those concepts become and the more they connect with the life of the one who is praying. Rabbi, theologian, and diplomat use a language of confidentiality that helps reveal.

My Perspective

Let me make some connections between my story and the subject of prayer. In some ways, the whole of this little book works as an introduction, but I want you to learn a little about what I think relevant from my life story to this book. I am an Armenian-American or a person of Armenian descent. My family came to the United States to escape the genocide of Armenian

people in the Ottoman Empire. When 1915 began, about two million Armenians lived in the Ottoman Empire (sometimes called the Turkish Empire). The genocide began with events on April 24, and by the end of the genocidal period, approximately 1.25 million Armenians were dead. Why? Ottoman leadership wanted to maintain the control and power it held throughout the nineteenth century while early twentieth-century geopolitical realities were changing the dynamics of that power. Armenians, a Christian minority within the empire, became a convenient target. The rhetoric of 1915 sounds much like the later rhetoric of Adolf Hitler in the 1930s concerning Jews in Germany. Many of the Armenians who survived and stayed in what became modern Turkey changed their surnames to blend more effectively into that place. Other survivors escaped and began to create new lives. Genocide is not only about killing people, but it attempts a total annihilation of any signs of that group of people. Armenian cemeteries were destroyed, and Armenian churches became mosques or jails.

My father's father rolled his extra shirt, a coffee pot, and two gold coins in a small prayer rug to make his journey. My mother's father tried to come to the United States, was turned away because of his age, and ended up in Brazil. He came to the United States a few years later. Given what I know of my grandparents, I suspect that they all would have preferred stable lives in the Old Country to being uprooted in

adulthood and tossed into the upheaval of learning a new language and different cultural survival skills. My parents tried to hide the facts of the genocide from my brother and me, a common survivor syndrome response. Even though we did not learn directly about the genocide, we could not forget it. As a boy growing up among survivors who tried not to speak of the horror of the genocide, I read some of the literature written by Armenians in the United States and realized that the impact of the genocide was central to much of that writing. When I went with my family to Armenian Church cultural festivals, I became aware that the church depended upon people to donate funds in memory of various relatives killed by the Turks. While my parents could not speak directly of the genocide, I learned that my father had two brothers under the age of ten who were killed in the genocide and that my mother's family also suffered losses. Later I learned more of the impact of the genocide and its aftermath on my family, including involvement in a plot to kill an Armenian archbishop who spoke of the need for forgiveness of the Turks.

One of my first lessons in prayer was an Armenian blessing before meals, which loosely translated begins, "Whatever we eat, whatever we drink, we give you thanks." To those who escaped by night through mountains and sheep pastures, past the patrols of Turkish gendarmes, and who came without documentation through Syria and Lebanon, who settled in France and who crossed the Atlantic to Ellis Island, "whatever we

eat, whatever we drink” carries far different nuances than our contemporary use of “whatever.”

Beyond the reference point of Armenian experience, *place* is significant in forming a basis for my prayer. I grew up in a small and somewhat unusual town in Virginia; the population included Armenians, Chinese, Greeks, Japanese, Lebanese, Syrians, and Turks. I attended public schools there and also went to Fork Union Military Academy as a 13-year-old in the ninth grade. Connected to the Virginia Baptist Assembly, Fork Union had chapel six days a week and inspections every day. I learned to shave, but my daily beard shadow never seemed to pass inspection so I vowed to grow a beard when I left that school. I learned to march and to do the basics of the manual of arms. I learned many military rules and regulations. As did many others who went to such heavily regimented schools, I also learned a variety of ways to evade those regulations and rules.

None of us escape the importance of work and vocation. I am ordained in the United Methodist Church. I have worked or served as a pastor of several relatively small congregations. I moved into religious publishing and was a developer of curriculum resources for churches, an editor, a marketing person, and a publisher. Before I did those things, I grew up in the family grocery store where I learned some butcher skills and more.

I’ve been unemployed. I’ve known the bitterness of losing a highly anticipated promotion and

the grief of losing a job. I've experienced the disappointment of seeing the wrong people promoted and also seeing corporate entities fire people who spoke necessary truth to the organization. I've experienced satisfaction in work done well.

Music and Prayer

Before I experienced the world of work or any of the other areas of life that are intended to prepare us for adulthood, I fell in love with music. By the time I was three, I wanted to play the piano, something that scared my father. I loved the exuberant music of Ludwig van Beethoven and Aram Khachaturian even before I knew who these composers were. I loved the music of bands at Armenian cultural festivals and the sacred music of church. When I was a little older, my parents tired of hearing my renditions of "Come On-A My House." Many years later I learned that this favorite song was written by two Armenian cousins: Ross Bagdasarian, more well known as Dave Seville, who created The Chipmunks, and William Saroyan, a Pulitzer Prize winner. Eventually a beat-up multiple-owner piano arrived in our house. I discovered that it had been a player piano, but no music rolls came with it. That piano served well for two years until my mother decided that I was "serious" about music and bought another second-hand piano. (Built in June 1936, that second piano lived to the age of 74 when the cracked soundboard and other

problems called for full retirement.) Later came an alto saxophone. Still in childhood, I began to play the organ at church services and then went through a period of playing rock organ on Saturday nights and sacred music on Sunday mornings.

I connect music and prayer, and I hope that you will see this connection as it grows throughout the book. When we begin to learn to play a musical instrument, we learn scales. A musical scale is simply a set of notes ordered by set frequencies. In Western music, scales generally consist of seven notes that either ascend or descend. When you sang or listened to the Christmas carol “Deck the Halls,” you may not have realized that the opening phrase begins with a simple descending scale. Take time to hum the opening line and notice the descent and ascent: “Deck the halls with boughs of holly.” We are singing part of a scale. Think of a scale as a basic foundation for music practice and performance. Musicians practice scales throughout their lifetimes because these scales continue to develop technique, touch, tone, and more. We practice scales until the fingering of the notes becomes as natural as breathing.

Scales are best practiced when no one else is listening. We play scales over and over and over again. As we practice and learn these scales, we make mistakes. Our fingers go to the wrong notes. If we are playing scales on the piano, one hand may go faster than the other hand. We practice, and we practice more. Our fingers gain a certain memory of how to play an

A Major scale and what makes playing that scale different from another scale. We practice over and over and over again so that the brain–muscle connection understands the different techniques. Scales are basic and necessary for learning to play music, but audiences do not generally listen to the playing of scales. The best place to practice scales is in a relatively soundproof room where no one else can audit the practice.

From the practice of instrumental technique through scales and other exercises, we begin to play music in small groups or ensembles. I consider a musical ensemble as a group of two to eleven musicians. (With twelve or more musicians, the interpersonal and musical dynamics of the group change.) Imagine such a group in a variety of settings and with different instrumental combinations. You may see a rock trio with two electric guitarists and a drummer. A classical quartet with viola, violin, cello, and piano may appear to your mind's eye. You may envision the jazz quintet that I see: saxophone, trumpet, bass, drums, and keyboard. No matter the type of music, musicians in such an ensemble are in conversation with one another. No one stands before them to give them direction. They base their playing on a common consent, and when such a group does not agree on basics of time and tune, then the music sounds terrible.

Ensemble playing is much more fun than sitting inside a practice room or closet or even on a dock

while practicing scales. When we play music with a small group, we listen to and depend on others while we also strive to do our best work. In such small-group play, we stand alone as solitary instrumentalists gathered with other solitary instrumentalists, and we become very much aware that our combined efforts will long exceed our solitary gifts.

After playing music in small groups, we may move on to play in larger bands or orchestras. The large band has a personality that differs from that of an ensemble. Such a large musical group plays broader categories of music and is capable of many different sounds. The musical instrumentation, tones, and dynamics are different. Leadership becomes more important than with an ensemble or in the scale closet. Whereas one person played saxophone in that jazz ensemble, the large band may have eight saxophone players. Whereas one person played violin in the quartet, sixteen violinists may play in an orchestra. Our individual voices or instruments are not as important as the magnitude of this multi-level orchestral sound.

Some prayers are like scales and best prayed in solitude and far from interruption. The diplomat's prayer falls into this category. We can slow our breathing as we pray these words and let this prayer grow in silent solitude.

Other prayers belong to small groups. The theologian's prayer is a primary example of the group or ensemble prayer. We may pray it by ourselves, but

the prayer grows deeper when we unite in a small group that prays this prayer as one voice. The rabbi's prayer evokes the orchestral approach to prayer. Individuals know the lines, but we pray it best when we are together with a large group of people and when we recognize that we pray this prayer with people scattered around the world and throughout time.

Forming New Traditions

We pray in our contemporary culture in many different ways, perhaps failing to understand the breadth of that diversity. Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, and other social networks offer us opportunities to communicate the variety of our senses of gratitude, outrage, thanksgiving, anger, wonder, grief, injustice, love, dismay, and woe. Tweets and posts and photos describe our moods, share our feelings, and establish conversational pathways about birth and death and all activities between the two poles of life on earth. And you ask, *So what does this have to do with a book on prayer?*

Through social networks we have opportunity to express our emotional and physical and mental states. We tell our stories. We give expression to our inner lives and to our outer circumstances. We keep track of our lives as if we were keeping a more formal diary or journal. What we communicate is shared with those who have been part of our lives for years and

to those we know only in their online identities. In a similar way, prayer offers us opportunity to connect with God and to be as honestly transparent with God as we are with the variety of friends and other connections in digital space.

We are praying. Our prayers may not fit the model of prayer that some people would require. After all, some people teach that prayer must follow an ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication) or a “five-finger method” or some other device. Other people teach that only if certain words are used will God hear a prayer. Those claims are misleading and perhaps misguided. I believe that God invites us to the dance of prayer. The words and forms that we use matter very little compared to the attitude and expectation that we bring.

Those people who would teach specific models of prayer are holding onto a tradition they received. Is the tradition right? More important, what is tradition? Our creative daily actions continually form new traditions. Whether the new tradition concerns a sports event or a special date on the calendar, our traditions remind us of past–present–future time. Whenever we celebrate an annual special event or day, tradition connects us with earlier years and nudges us to anticipate future celebrations. We gather for our personal traditions, enjoying them and the friends who become part of the festivity. We participate in activities that are specific to the day or moment. We take pleasure in special foods or games or other aspects of the

tradition. We create ritual practices for our traditions (such as how to set up the chairs for the homecoming tailgate event or who is the undisputed authority for the game always played at the gathering), and we understand their significance. What do we do then with the traditions we inherit from others? What if we have inherited the practice without the history of its significance? Do we abandon those traditions, reinvent them, give them new meanings, discover that the old meaning makes sense, or replace these traditions with something entirely different? Every one of us will offer a different response, and the answer will vary within us over time.

Tradition is an odd word that has come to carry some political baggage. Many people read or hear the words “we believe in the traditional faith” or “traditional family values” and begin to cringe. I know that I do. I want to ask, “How do you define ‘traditional faith’? Whose tradition? Does that tradition go back to the third century or does it go back to 1958?” I want to dive into our understanding of tradition because many times people use the word *tradition* when they actually mean custom or conventional wisdom. In *No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Merton described tradition as life-giving and fertile, whereas custom, he declared, was sterile and stagnant. Convention is simply a casual acceptance of statements without seeking any validation. Convention or custom births the statements of opinion that my father would make, which usually began “They tell me that” “Who is *they*?”

I would ask him, not in hostility but to learn. Because he did not know who they were, my father would usually shake his head in disgust and walk away from the conversation. Convention thus is simply accepted without question. Tradition comes alive because we question its meaning and purpose. As we ask questions of purpose, we wrestle intellectually with those concepts. We begin to experience the significance of those traditions, and they give birth to innovation and freshness within our lives. Tradition is creative, whereas convention simply expects us to remain the same. Conventional wisdom teaches us to go along and thus get along with others. Conventional wisdom tends to breed fear and anxiety because we see matters that are unjust and yet are expected to avoid asking questions. Tradition leads us to the wisdom to say that the emperor is naked and abusing power. At its best, tradition nourishes us, giving us deep roots and empowering us to contribute to the growth of tradition. Convention encourages us to do nothing and try to remain the same. I do not care for convention for the sake of convention; I value tradition, and so the three prayers that you'll want to pray with me are rooted in tradition, but their approach to God and to our lives is always fresh and always becoming new. The three prayers of this book are grounded in tradition, but they are not traditional and they should not fall into the category of conventional wisdom. If they are considered custom or convention, I think their originators would be upset.

I pray that you will find these three prayers of tremendous depth and value and that you will grow to love them, that you will practice them, and that you will live the reality that they point toward.