

“A Knock at the Door: Prayer, Hope, Love and the Fourth Source”

December 3, 2017

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Before I begin, I wish to acknowledge our choir, unusually absent from the sanctuary. They are at the Arlington Street Church in Boston, joining their choir in debuting John Kramer’s original cantata, *The Immigrant Experience* this morning. I look forward to welcoming them back next Sunday, along with ASC’s choir, as the cantata is performed again, here in this sacred space.

If you have never worshiped in the magnificent Arlington Street Church sanctuary, it is an incredible experience. There are a few services, though, that stand out in my memory from the seven years I belonged to that community.

One of those services was on Easter morning. Our minister, the Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie, began her sermon with this story, as I remember it:

It was almost Christmas and we were busy preparing for the Christmas Eve services and annual Hanukkah celebration. A good friend, a rabbi in Chicago, was kind enough to lend us a menorah that has been in his family for generations for the services. We awaited its arrival with great anticipation.

When it did arrive and we opened the box, though, I was horrified. Somehow, in transit, one of the arms of the menorah snapped off. In that moment, I felt personally responsible for the Holocaust.

We found a way to jerry rig the menorah for worship and made an appointment with a metalsmith to make it whole again. And, then, with a heavy heart, I picked up the phone to call my friend to tell him the terrible news. Once we connected and I blurted out what happened, I heard only silence on the other end, a silence that ended with his response.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he said. “It’s okay. Don’t you understand? That menorah has been broken and fixed many times over the years. Brokenness and repair is at the very heart of the Jewish story.”

Brokenness and repair. Brokenness and resurrection...

This story stays with me for many reasons. For one, you know you are celebrating Easter in a Unitarian Universalist congregation when the sermon begins with a story about a menorah. If nothing else, we are people of theological dexterity.

But it also stays with me as it speaks an essential truth. From slavery to freedom, from destruction of the temple to its rebuilding, Judaism is defined as a faith of brokenness and repair.

But Judaism is not alone in this distinction. When we celebrate the birth of a Jewish boy named Jesus, we remember the time of his birth, a time when all male children were subject to death by jealous King Herod. And, yet, “Christ the Savior is born” and survives into adulthood, leading a ministry proclaiming God’s love. Suffering emerges again with Jesus’ persecution and crucifixion. But death is not the end of the story as Jesus is reborn. Brokenness and resurrection.

The word “religion” derives from the Latin, “religare,” “to bind together.” As human experience includes enduring brokenness and the miracle of binding, of repair, perhaps it is true for every tribe of the spirit. Perhaps the story of every people and every tradition is a story of brokenness and repair, of death and life, of light illuminating night, of binding and fracturing, of despair and hope.

Like Arlington Street Church those many years ago, with the beginning of December we turn our hearts and minds to Jewish and Christian holidays, Hanukkah and Christmas. And, in so doing, we tell stories of night turning to dawn, of – despite the odds – love winning in the end.

This morning, as we gather in what feels like an unrelenting time of brokenness in our world, we are called to reflect upon the audacious notion of repair and to become open to the theme of this month, hope.

We are also invited to consider the Fourth Source of Unitarian Universalism, “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” This morning, we are encouraged open ourselves to the possibility that, no matter how we understand its origin, there is a greater, larger love beyond what we can perceive in our individual lives and concerns. And

some of that love is available to each and everyone of us as perhaps each and every one of us is a vessel and conduit of that care.

Knowing that Judaism and Christianity are traditions that understand brokenness and repair, the need for hope, in preparation for today's service I explore two resources that examine spiritual practices seeking to deliver us from despair. Both resources, by DovBer Pinson, a Chabad Rabbi, and Carl Scovel, a local Unitarian Christian minister, reflect on the meaning and practice of prayer.

Rabbi Pinson's book, *The Inner Worlds of Jewish Prayer*, is exhaustive in its examination of how to prepare for, approach and conduct prayer within the Jewish tradition. And, yet, some of his insights offer us simple places to begin.

Prayer begins with intention. Pinson tells a story of a student who travels a great distance to meet his Rabbi. He arrives in town, hungry and tired, delighted to see the light on in the Rabbi's study. The student knocks at the door but there is no answer. He knocks again and, despite the light burning, there is no response. The student knocks and knocks through the night until the Rabbi opens the door in the morning. Turning to the student, he says, "I heard you knocking but I wanted to teach you a lesson. You don't need to let in everyone who knocks."

This lesson, as I understand it, is about focusing our minds so we let in what serves our spirits while ignoring that which does not. This lesson is valuable not only as it pertains to prayer but also in how we conduct our everyday lives.

I now hear of many people taking "social media fasts," unplugging from the constant "knocking" in our world, the perpetual barrage of on-line bad news. To refuse to "answer the door" when the ugliness of the world comes calling is a counter-cultural act. Think about it. If a Tweet is sent and no one reads it, does it really make a sound? Pinson suggests that to make space to connect with the divine, we have to let go of distractions, demands and messages that do not serve us. Whatever we give our attention to, whatever we welcome into our minds requires our permission to enter.

When we pray, Pinson affirms, we enter into the tension of two realities, the simultaneous truths that everything is perfect and something must change. While these two understandings are seemingly contradictory, when we give voice to our

need through prayer, it is a hopeful act as it assumes there is something beyond ourselves that can enact the change we seek. Prayer in itself assumes that we dwell in such a perfect world that our needs can be met. Pinson concludes that prayer either yields what we desire or it moves us closer to acceptance of life as it is.

Our other philosophical companion, Carl Scovel, Minister Emeritus of Kings Chapel in Boston, describes the process of prayer in similar terms in his book *A Prayer Book Companion: A Guide to Christian Worship*. He writes, “We believe that God will answer our prayer ‘as may be most expedient for us.’ That means if we didn’t get the bicycle we prayed for at age seven, the honors we hoped for in high school or the promotion in later years, God gave us the chance to become wiser, tougher and more real if we were willing to use the opportunity to do so.”<sup>1</sup>

While Pinson dwells mostly on the individual experience of prayer, Scovel illustrates prayer as a collective act, through worship. He begins his *Prayer Book Companion* by inviting us to consider King Chapel’s prayer book as “the script of a play.” He continues “The play is the liturgy, the stage is the church, the plot is a story...We, the worshippers, are the cast. And the world, not us, is the audience.”<sup>2</sup> In this way, Scovel defines prayer as not just a connection between singular humans and the divine but among one another affirming, “Praying with our peers in the pews gives us a common kinship with God...[W]hen we pray with other people, we know them in a special way.”<sup>3</sup>

In case you are wondering, I have not forgotten that this is a Unitarian Universalist sanctuary. I have not forgotten that there are many among us who do not pray and who do not affirm that there is a God to pray to.

While we are a theologically dexterous and diverse people, Pinson and Scovel offer all of us gifts. I often recall a quote by the author of this morning’s reading, Gordon Atkinson, who once said, “whether God exists or not is none of my business, really.” I understand this to mean that theist, agnostic or atheist, the reality is the same; there is a complex world beyond our egos and desires on which we are dependent for our very survival. Our power to affect this world is

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<sup>1</sup> Scovel, Carl. *A Prayer Book Companion: A Guide to Christian Worship*. The Society of King’s Chapel: Boston, MA, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 33.

limited, sometimes leaving us hungry for hope. And our power to perceive what is possible is also limited, rendering us not only vulnerable but vulnerable to grace. To miracle. The only certainty in this world is that we are called to care for one another. For me, the most important question is not “To whom do we pray?” but “How do we relate to the reality of the world beyond our singular selves, our individual needs?”

Whether you pray or not, you are here this morning, taking time apart from your everyday lives to join in this collective spiritual practice called worship. Together, we have shut the door on the dominant culture outside these walls. Together, we have come to know fellow human beings “in a special way” by participating in this practice of public intimacy – singing, listening, meditating and – indeed – praying together.

When I think of prayer as a collective act, I think of the Jewish prayer, the Mourner’s Kaddish. What makes this funereal prayer unique is that it does not reference death at all but simply praises God. I understand that this is to remember that, even amid profound loss, life is worth celebrating. And, as this prayer cannot be said alone but in community, those who are in desperate grief are surrounded by others who can praise God for them, can celebrate life for them, can have hope for a life beyond grief for them.

We do not need to respond to every knock at the door. But, sometimes, we are on the other side, knocking to be let in. In this morning’s reading, Atkinson recalls a wise preacher’s observation that “until you’ve stood at the door for years and knocked until your hands bled, hearing nothing but silence, you don’t know what prayer is.” These words remind us of the simultaneous tension between life’s perfection and the reality that something must change but place greater weight on the real challenge of hope.

Scovel and Pinson proclaim that their tribes of the spirit – Christianity and Judaism – reassure us that we do not knock alone. As Scovel affirms, the ritual of communion sometimes includes a passage from the book of Revelation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and I will sup with him and he with me.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 90.

In the spirit of this promise, I conclude with one of my favorite Christmas stories. Scholarly internet research cannot confirm that it really happened but we do know that this story was first published in Readers Digest in 1966. And it conveys a truth about what it means to “love our neighbor as ourselves” that transcends historical authenticity.

The story is about a boy named Wally and another kind of religious play, the classic Nativity pageant. As noted in the Digest, in part:

Wally was nine that year and in the second grade, though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty keeping up. He was big and awkward, slow in movement and mind.

Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd in the Christmas pageant, but the play's director, Miss Lumbard, assigned him a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the innkeeper did not have too many lines, and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

And so it happened that the usual...audience gathered for the town's yearly [nativity] extravaganza...

...[T]he time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door, set into the painted backdrop. Wally the innkeeper was there, waiting.

"What do you want?" Wally said...

"We seek lodging."

"Seek it elsewhere...The inn is filled..."

"Please, good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired."

Now, for the first time, the innkeeper...looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

"No! Begone!" the prompter whispered.

"No!"..."Begone!"

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head upon her husband's shoulder and the two of them started to move away. The innkeeper did not return inside his inn, however. Wally stood there in the doorway, watching the forlorn couple...

And suddenly this Christmas pageant became different from all others.

"Don't go, Joseph," Wally called out. "Bring Mary back." And Wallace Purling's face grew into a bright smile. "You can have my room."<sup>5</sup>

From the perspective of biblical accuracy and theatrical performance, Wally's ethical improv ruined the annual pageant. But in the way that Judaism and Christianity teach us to serve as the bearers of hope to one another, as vessels of divine love, this is the only way this play could end. Wally had no choice to hear Joseph and Mary's knock and to let them in.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/people-helping-people/trouble-at-the-inn>