

**Prayer**  
**Rev. Frieda Gillespie**  
**10/30/18**

**Gathering Music –**

**Greeting from the Board –**

**Welcome and Announcements**

**Opening Hymn:** Walking with You

**Opening words**

In his poem “Love Dogs” Sufi poet, Rumi, tells this story:

One night a man was crying,  
“Allah! Allah!”  
His lips grew sweet with the praising,  
until a cynic said,  
“So! I have heard you  
calling out, but have ever gotten a response?”  
The man had no answer for that.  
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.  
He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,  
in a thick, green foliage,  
“Why did you stop praising?”  
“Because I never heard anything back.”  
“This longing you express  
is the return message.”  
The grief you cry out from draws you toward union.  
Your pure sadness that wants to help is the secret cup.  
Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.  
That whining is the connection.  
There are love dogs no one knows the names of.  
Give your life to be one of them.

Come, let us worship together.

**Chalice lighting (unison)**

Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being  
to receive, to carry, and to give back.

--Dag Hammarskjold

**Offering -**

**Story for All Ages – Ashley Benner, Interim DRE**  
Singing out the children –

## Cares and Celebrations -

### **Meditation**

Meta meditation

May I/you/you/we be filled with loving-kindness

May I/you/you/we be well.

May I/you/you/we be peaceful and at ease.

May I/you/you/we be whole.

### **Musical Response:**

**Reading** – from “Half Broke Horses” by Jeanette Walls

I'd mostly finished my chores for the day and was heading down to the pasture with my brother, Buster, and my sister Helen, to bring the cows in for their milking. But when we got there, those girls were acting all bothered. Instead of milling around at the gate, like they usually did at milking time, they were standing stiff-legged and straight-tailed, twitching their heads around, listening.

Buster and Helen looked up at me, and without a word, I knelt down and pressed my ear to the hard-packed dirt. There was a rumbling, so faint and low that you felt it more than you heard it. Then I knew what the cows knew—a flash flood was coming.

As I stood up, the cows bolted heading for the southern fence line...

I figured we best bolt, too, so I grabbed Helen and Buster by the hand. By then I could feel the ground rumbling through my shoes. I saw the first water sluicing through the lowest part of the pasture, and I knew we didn't have time to make it to higher ground ourselves. In the middle of the field was an old cottonwood tree, broad-branched and gnarled, and we ran for that.

Helen stumbled, so Buster grabbed her other hand, and we lifted her off the ground and carried her between us as we ran. When we reached the cottonwood, I pushed Buster up to the lowest branch, and he pulled Helen into the tree behind him. I shimmied up and wrapped my arms around Helen just as a wall of water, about six feet high and pushing rocks and tree limbs in front of it, slammed into the cottonwood, dousing all three of us. The tree shuddered and bent over so far that you could hear wood cracking, and some lower branches were torn off. I feared it might be uprooted, but the cottonwood held fast and so did we, our arms locked as a great rush of caramel-colored water, filled with bits of wood and the occasional matted gopher and tangle of snakes, surged beneath us...

We just sat there in that cottonwood tree watching... The sun started to set over the Burnt Spring Hills, turning the high clouds crimson and sending long purple shadows eastward. The water was still flowing beneath us, and Helen said her arms were getting tired. She was only seven and was afraid she couldn't hold on much longer.

Buster, who was nine, was perched up in the big fork of the tree. I was ten, the oldest, and I took charge, telling Buster to trade places with Helen so she could sit upright without having to cling too hard... From time to time we switched places so no one's arms would wear out... About half way through the night Helen's voice started getting weak.

"I can't hold on any longer," she said.

"Yes, you can," I told her. "You can because you have to." We were going to make it, I told them. I knew we would because I could see it in my mind. I could see us walking up the hill to the house tomorrow morning, and I could see Mom and Dad running out. It would happen—but it was up to us to make it happen.

To keep Helen and Buster from drifting off to sleep and falling out of the cottonwood, I grilled them on their multiplication tables. When we'd run through those, I went on to Presidents and state capitals, the word definitions, word rhymes and whatever else I could come up with, snapping at them if their voices faltered, and that was how I kept Helen and Buster awake through the night.

By first light...I figured it would be safe to wade through the water, so we scrambled out of the cottonwood tree...we got to dry land as the sun was coming up and climbed the hill to the house just the way I had seen it.

...Mom came running out of the house. She sank to her knees clasped her hands in front of her, and started praying up to the heavens, thanking the Lord for delivering her children from the flood.

It was she who saved us, she declared, by staying up all night praying. "You get down on your knees and thank your guardian angel," she said. "And you thank me too."

Helen and Buster got down and started praying with Mom, but I just stood there looking at them. The way I saw it, I was the one who'd saved us all, not Mom and not some guardian angel. No one was up in that cottonwood tree except the three of us. Dad came alongside me and put his arm around my shoulders.

"There weren't no guardian angel, Dad," I said. I started explaining how I'd gotten us to the cottonwood tree in time, figuring out how to switch places when our arms got tired and keeping Buster and Helen awake through the long night by quizzing them. Dad squeezed my shoulder. "Well, darling," he said, "maybe the angel was you."

**Hymn:** #352 Find a Stillness

**Sermon** – "The Mystery of Prayer" – Rev. Frieda Gillespie

I wonder if I asked you if you pray or not, how many of you would raise your hands. I don't want to put you on the spot, so I won't ask the question. We're probably one of the only churches where people might be more reluctant to admit to praying than not.

Prayer is a very interesting and somewhat complex phenomenon. There are different types of prayers and they really are very different in their feeling and purpose and our expectations in praying. There is the question of who and what we are praying for and the most contemporary inquiry into whether there is any objective way to measure the power of prayer.

The most common types of prayers are those of petition and intercession. Praying for something for ourselves or others is what we usually think of as prayer. What are we really doing when we pray in this way? Do we believe as the girl's mother in our reading does that we affect events in our lives and others by our prayers? Was the girl correct in thinking that what miracles we experience are the ones we make happen?

There is a now famous study in recent years of the effect of prayer on the healing of coronary care patients. There was a double blind study of two groups of patients, one that had a group of Christians praying for them and the other who were not prayed for by this group. The paper made a big point of saying they were praying to the Judeo-Christian God. The group that was prayed for showed a statistically significant increase in their progress toward recovery. It's an inconclusive experiment however, as most are, in that there was no way for those running the experiment to know whether the control group was prayed for by others in their lives. It was also only a 10% increase in the prayed for group's progress which is really very small even if significant.

Once again the mixing up of science and religion seems to lead to more confusion than new understanding. I think we have to look at the value of prayer in its own terms, as a subjective experience.

During my illness, I had many friends and family who said they were praying for me. There were many others who read my CarePage updates and commented on them. The effect on me as a person going through a lot of difficulty was quite pronounced. While it didn't save me from suffering the effects of the cancer or chemotherapy, having these loving people including many of you, respond and attend to my suffering, made me stronger in my response to it myself. I'm sure that that sense of strength had an effect on my body as well. I loved the idea that friends and family of many different faiths: Mormons, Episcopalians, Jews, atheists, agnostics, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and many others were all praying or pulling for me to get through and get well. This kind of attention was very healing for me.

However, I don't know if this could be generalized for everyone. I suggested the CarePages to one person going through cancer and they had a look that might be described as horror, certainly it was disconcerting to them to consider having so many people know about their suffering.

When I was in seminary, I took a course in the book of Psalms. It was one of my favorite courses. Our professor was a Catholic woman who may have belonged to a religious order, I can't recall. But she is one of many amazing Catholic women who would make amazing priests and aren't allowed to be. She asked us to select two Psalms to present to the class. One of the ones I picked, Psalm 88, turned out to be the only Psalm in the book that doesn't have a happy ending. It is entirely a lament of suffering and abandonment by God. This is Psalm 88:

LORD, you are the God who saves me;  
day and night I cry out to you.

<sup>2</sup> May my prayer come before you;  
turn your ear to my cry.

<sup>3</sup> I am overwhelmed with troubles  
and my life draws near to death.

<sup>4</sup> I am counted among those who go down to the pit;  
I am like one without strength.

<sup>5</sup> I am set apart with the dead,  
like the slain who lie in the grave,  
whom you remember no more,  
who are cut off from your care.

<sup>6</sup> You have put me in the lowest pit,  
in the darkest depths.

<sup>7</sup> Your wrath lies heavily on me;  
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.<sup>[d]</sup>  
<sup>8</sup> You have taken from me my closest friends  
and have made me repulsive to them.  
I am confined and cannot escape;  
<sup>9</sup> my eyes are dim with grief.

I call to you, LORD, every day;  
I spread out my hands to you.  
<sup>10</sup> Do you show your wonders to the dead?  
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?  
<sup>11</sup> Is your love declared in the grave,  
your faithfulness in Destruction<sup>[e]</sup>?  
<sup>12</sup> Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,  
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

<sup>13</sup> But I cry to you for help, LORD;  
in the morning my prayer comes before you.  
<sup>14</sup> Why, LORD, do you reject me  
and hide your face from me?

<sup>15</sup> From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;  
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.  
<sup>16</sup> Your wrath has swept over me;  
your terrors have destroyed me.  
<sup>17</sup> All day long they surround me like a flood;  
they have completely engulfed me.  
<sup>18</sup> You have taken from me friend and neighbor—  
darkness is my closest friend.

A woman in my class spoke to me after I presented this and said that this Psalm was a great comfort to her during a time when she was going through a contentious divorce and serious illness at the same time. She liked that it didn't offer hope because she did not want easy consolation. In a strange way, she found more comfort from this desolate prayer than any hopeful one.

People stand up regularly during Cares and Celebrations here and ask us to keep them or a loved one in our prayers or thoughts. What does it do for that person and for us as a community to be together sharing in each other's joys and sorrows? How did doing the Meta meditation, which is a prayer, transform your state of mind? Whatever that is for you, is the power of prayer. And it is particularly the power of corporate prayer, that is, intentional prayer in a group setting.

Listen to a few of these prayers of petition and intercession by Marianne Williamson:

Dear God,  
My body is broken,  
I need Your help.  
I fear I will not get well.  
Please God,  
send angels to deliver me from my pain  
and sickness  
and fear,

now.

I know salvation is the only true Cure,  
and yet I doubt  
when my body hurts.  
Help me, Lord.  
Please bless my medicine  
and guide my healers,  
Thank you God.  
Amen

Dear God,  
I feel there is no getting past  
the details of my life,  
The mountain  
that sits upon my desk  
now sits  
upon my heart.  
Clean both,  
dear God.  
Amen

The next type of prayer is meditation. Yes, meditation is a prayer. It is an attitude of listening deeply, listening beyond our mind's chatter—the monkey mind—to what might come to us from a deeper wisdom. That wisdom is found within us, no matter where you might believe it comes from. Silence, reflection, wonder, being present, mindfulness are all aspects of this type of prayer.

Another type of prayer is penitence – the desire to be forgiven for our wrongdoing. We all make mistakes and our recognition of this and desire to make amends is a prayer. Here is such a prayer from the great biologist, Jane Goodall:

“I pray to the great spiritual power in which I live and move and have my being. I pray to God. I pray that we may at all times keep our minds open to new ideas and shun dogma; that we may grow in our understanding of the nature of all living beings and our connections with the natural world; that we may become ever more filled with generosity of spirit and true compassion and love for all life; that we may strive to heal the hurts we have inflicted on nature and control our greed for material things, knowing that our actions are harming our natural world; that we may value each and every human being for who he is, for who she is, reaching to the spirit that is within, knowing the power of each individual to change the world.”

Michael Judd lent me a book of African prayers and pointed out this one from Ghana that is really a mixture of many types of prayers. At its heart though is the desire to avoid the disaster of a particular kind of poor judgment even if the author doesn't quite admit it openly.

Lord,  
the motor under me is running hot.  
Lord,  
there are twenty-eight people  
and lots of luggage in the truck.

Underneath are my bad tires.  
The brakes are unreliable.  
Unfortunately I have no money,  
and parts are difficult to get.  
Lord,  
I did not overload the truck.  
Lord,  
"Jesus is mine"  
is written on the vehicle,  
for without him I would not drive a single mile.  
The people in the back are relying on me.  
They trust me because they see the words:  
"Jesus is mine."  
Lord,  
I trust you!  
First comes the straight road  
with little danger,  
I can keep my eyes on the women,  
children and chickens in the village.  
But soon the road begins to turn,  
It goes up and down,  
it jumps and dances,  
this death road to Kumasi.  
Tractors carrying mahogany trunks drive  
as if there were no right or left.  
Lord,  
Kumasi is the temptation  
to take more people than we should.  
Let's overcome it!  
The road to Accra is another problem.  
Truck drivers try to beat the record,  
although the road is poor  
and has many holes  
and there are many curves  
before we come to the hills.  
And finally to Akwasim.  
Passing large churches in every village,  
I am reminded of you, and in reverence  
I take off my hat.  
Now downhill in second gear.

You might be surprised at the next type of prayer. It is prayers of consecration. These are prayers of action and service. If you find yourself devoting time and energy in service to others, your very efforts are prayers of consecration. Mother Teresa is an oft-cited example of this. I can think of many of you who are lifting up prayers of consecration in your volunteer work, your employment and your personal lives. It is doing, acting from your deepest sense of what is true, valuable, and ethical. By living that conviction, you are affirming its worth and offering your life, yourself to its purposes. The girl in our reading could be said to be acting on a prayer of consecration. She valued her life and the life of her brother and sister enough to give her all to save them. The prayer is not to a "father in the sky" type God, but to her own vision of what is possible and the importance of making it come true.

The last two types of prayer are those of praise and thanksgiving. They are very similar in that they are both prayers of joy. Whether general or specific, these prayers acknowledge the joy and beauty of life. Whenever we count our blessings or simply stop to take in a deep blue sky and the sun turning the snow on trees to glistening diamonds, we are lifting up prayers of praise and thanksgiving. We may not say the words but our very being is a prayer.

Here is a beautiful prayer of both praise and thanksgiving from Ghana:

Lord, my joys mount as do the birds,  
heavenward.

The night has taken wings  
and I rejoice in the light.  
What a day, Lord! What a day!  
Your sun has burned away the dew  
from the grass and from our hearts.  
What erupts from us,  
what encircles us this morning,  
is thanksgiving.

Lord, we thank you for all and everything.  
Lord, I thank you for what I am,  
for my body tall and broad,  
despite the meager meals at school,  
and although Father has no work.  
This body grows and grows  
even with malaria in my blood.

Lord, I also thank you  
for this job [on the railway]  
which I found during my holidays.  
I make good money;  
the money for school lies already in Father's trunk.  
You can let me advance far, but I know  
I can never outdo your trees.

Lord, I am happy this morning.  
Birds and angels sing and I am exultant.  
The universe and our hearts are open to your grace.  
I feel my body and give thanks.  
The sun burns my skin and I thank you.  
The breakers are rolling toward the seashore,  
the sea foam splashes our house.  
I give thanks.

Lord I rejoice in your creation,  
and that you are behind it, and before,  
and next to it, and above—and within us.

Lord, your sun is balmy,  
it caresses the grass and the cassava out of the clay,  
tops it with flowers,

draws out the mahogany,  
throws birds into the sky,  
and out of us it drums  
a song of praise for you.

This is such a rich prayer. It is full of the realities of this young man's life, those that are difficult and those that are joyful. On this day, the joy is more real to him. Of what importance is it to name that joy? What does this do for him? What does it do for us listening to his words?

If we are affected positively by prayer, our own or others, does prayer then affect our ability to do what we can, and perhaps more than we knew we could, for ourselves? Does it lift our spirits to meet the challenges of our lives?

Ultimately prayer is a solitary experience. Even in a large group, what we experience is entirely our own and unique to us. Let us close with this blessing for solitude by John O'Donohue:

May you recognize in your life the presence,  
power, and light of your soul.

May you realize that you are never alone,  
that your soul in its brightness and belonging,  
connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.

May you have respect for your individuality and difference.  
May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique,  
that you have a special destiny here,  
that behind the façade of your life,  
there is something beautiful and eternal happening.

May you learn to see yourself,  
with the same delight,  
pride and expectation,  
with which God sees you in every moment.

May it be so.

**Hymn:** #112 Do You Hear?

**Closing words**

The blessing of truth be upon us,  
the power of love direct us and  
sustain us,  
and may the peace of this  
community preserve our going  
out and coming in,  
from this time forth, until  
we meet again.

Duke Gray