
When You Just Don't Know... Even How to Pray

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 12 - Year A**

Do you remember a few weeks ago, when our lector Bill Brockman read St. Paul's classic statement of confusion, from Romans 7: "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what's right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*"

It's a tongue-twister, to be sure! But it's so true, isn't it? Like Paul, I don't understand my own self, and I have no idea what I'm doing. I want to do the right thing, I really do, but so often I don't; so often, I don't even know what the right thing is.

That's true now more than ever! We're living through a time of profound disorientation and not knowing. You see, there's this pandemic, which has thrust us into new, uncharted territory. It has confused or complicated the simplest, daily decisions, and made some of them quite contentious: Should I get a haircut, or go to the dentist, or allow my children to meet up with friends? Should masks be required of everyone? Should our students return to campus? Should we visit loved ones, who are sick or dying?

But that's not all. There have been very public injustices and protests, which have triggered hard conversations and reflections, especially about race. I, for one, am coming to see myself and my whole way of life very differently and realizing that there is so much I don't know. That even though I want to do good, to be good, I still do and say and participate in hurtful things.

Then there's our political situation, and all the division and ugliness it is evoking. Including people, good people, not just disagreeing about what is best for our country and how to pursue it, but also being downright mean to one another. (Likely because of their own insecurity and fear!)

And there is death, the greatest unknown of all, which is upfront and center these days: the deaths of people sick from COVID-19, the deaths of loved ones from other things, the deaths of people of color and of public servants, the death of the way things used to be.

At the threshold of death, we don't understand. We don't know what we're supposed to do, or say, or pray. Thankfully, we aren't the first to stand at this threshold, and we can draw on ancient rituals and prayers of the community. But in these times, even these rituals are changed! Many of us can't attend funerals, or gather with family members in the wake of a death.

This is new territory, indeed, and there is so much we just don't know anymore. For some of us, many perhaps, this not-knowing extends even to our understanding of God, our spiritual lives, and prayer. Yes, even prayer.

It takes me back to my time in the new territory of hospital chaplaincy. I felt overwhelmed every time I was called upon to visit and pray with a dying patient. What would I say, or pray, when I crossed the threshold into their room? It wasn't simply the threshold between the hallway and the room; it was also the threshold between my knowledge and mystery. Between control and helplessness. Between strength and weakness, life and death. And so before knocking on the door, I begged God every time: "Oh Lord, help me be enough; make your presence known in spite of me; pray through me."

Though my words often failed, the Spirit did not. In fact, the most powerful prayers were the ones when I said nothing, because there was nothing to say, no conversation to be had. The patient lay dying, beyond speaking

or understanding my little words anyway. And yet, there was prayer. Prayer from soul to soul, spirit to spirit, in *the Spirit*. Prayer in which I felt the presence of saints “on the other side,” with whom the dying person already seemed to be communicating, spirit to spirit. Over time, I learned to trust this prayer of the spirit.

Later, that trust would help me through one of my most epic fails in prayer. I had been visiting someone on death row for almost four years. His name was Marion, and he would be turning 44 three days from today. Thirteen months ago, he lost his last appeal on a Wednesday morning and was scheduled to be executed that same evening. After they took Marion away, I waited with his mother, and some other family and attorneys, at a hospitality house not far away, a holy place if there ever was one.

When we got word that the dreaded moment was now, a heavy hush fell. Someone asked me to pray. Thankfully, I had my prayer book with me. I read the Prayer of Commendation, and then led us in the Lord’s Prayer. Except that halfway through, I completely forgot the words. The weight of the moment was too much. And yet, again, there was prayer. Though I was very embarrassed, and so sorry, there was prayer; there was the Spirit, interceding for everyone—*everyone*—affected, with sighs too deep for words.

In a way, my word-ful prayer falling apart was what that moment required, that moment in which everything fell apart. Had I not lost my words, I might have continued to believe that the prayer was up to me, and missed the Spirit’s deeper, truer prayer in that unfathomable moment.

Later that night, I came home and cried. A lot. But I still couldn’t pray, not in the way I was used to. I didn’t even want to, because I was so, so disappointed in God, and angry with God. I didn’t want to make sense of this, and I refused to see good in it.

But somehow I still knew this: I could give myself over to this grief, this disorientation, because I knew that God wouldn’t leave me there. I knew that the Spirit would help me in my weakness, and pray when I couldn’t. I knew that not even this irreconcilable trauma, nor my doubt nor anger, could separate me—or any of us—from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And that diminished their power over me even in that moment.

There are so many things that threaten to separate us from God’s love, and from one another. Indeed, separation is a sad, hard fact of this current time we’re living through, too; and it’s bringing many of us face to face with the limits of our knowing and understanding, our control, our planning, our fixing and helping. In physical separation from so many family and friends, and amid daily reminders of our own mortality, we are having to trust more and more in the power and goodness and love of God; in the Spirit’s presence and care, strength and prayer; and in the spiritual realm and the spiritual *communion* we share, with both the living and the dead.

It’s no accident, of course, that our liturgies around death, that ultimate of thresholds, are filled with words about entrusting our loved ones to God’s never-failing care and love—commending them into our Savior’s merciful hands, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. That is what we do at death: entrust our loved ones, or ourselves, to God; and trust in the spiritual communion of saints. That is what we are having to do today, with the those we can’t see or comfort in person. That is what we are having to do with all that we don’t know or comprehend, with all that we are losing and grieving.

At the threshold of death, whether physical death, or the loss of a cherished way of life or self-image or future; and at the threshold of your own ability to understand, help, control, pray; may you know this: The Spirit helps you in your weakness, and prays when you can’t. God carries you over every threshold, and into and through the unknown. And nothing, no loss or death or you-fill-in-the-blank, can separate you or your loved ones from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, who is working all things toward good, and who reigns over all other powers, and who *will* have the final word.