



“Junk Drawer Piety”

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Luke 11:1–13 (NRSV)***

The Rev. John Thomas, immediate Past President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ, once explained in a sermon I heard him deliver that some of our ecumenical partners view our denomination as a kind of theological junk drawer—a place where one could find odds and ends of a wide variety of creeds, catechisms, and doctrines, but in no recognizable order. I’m quite certain that those who view us this way don’t see the euphemism “theological junk drawer” as a compliment.

While I argue—as John Thomas does—that there is a logic and coherence to our beliefs and values, I am not surprised by this characterization and I don’t see it necessarily as an unflattering one. Maybe that’s because I’m rather fond of junk drawers. My grandparents had a junk drawer. My parents had a junk drawer. And, Stephanie and I have a junk drawer. Junk drawers, in my view, are valuable, regardless of whether they are literal or figurative junk drawers.

One of the things that I love about the United Church of Christ is that we are nothing if not an eclectic people. One of our recently confirmed members affirmed this fact on Confirmation Day 2010. Her father reported to me after worship that day, May 23, that earlier his daughter had observed at the breakfast table that, “If you ever wanted an illustration of the UCC slogan, ‘Whoever you are, wherever you are on life’s journey, just look at our confirmation class!’”

So we have variety, theologically speaking, in our tradition. We have diversity among our members and friends. And, not surprisingly, because of our diverse heritage and membership, the spiritual practices found in our congregations and among our people vary widely. Some thirst for something more or something different from what they were raised with, while others are quite content to keep up with the practices that are most familiar to them.

Some people see the diversity inherent in UCC theology, membership, and piety as negative qualities; but I (and most people in the UCC) see our diversity as a positive.

We are not alone in our affirmation of diversity, including diverse spiritual practices. Today's gospel reading illustrates that there is solid biblical precedent for diverse approaches to Christian piety, including our prayer practices.

Take a close look at Luke 11 with me, and you will see that the author uses this chapter as a kind of junk drawer for storing his memory of Jesus' teachings about prayer.

The "literary container" for Luke's junk drawer on prayer is a Q&A between Jesus and his disciples who have asked for guidance about prayer. Their questions and his answers most likely were gathered from several different settings and teachings, and are held together here in a Q&A format.

The disciples wanted to know what words they should say, what formulas were best, and what postures they should assume in prayer. Clearly, the disciples presumed (as many of us do) that there is a "right way" to pray, and that those in Jesus' inner circle should know that right way and practice it. Like usual, the disciples were a bit off the mark, so Luke (through this collection of Jesus' teachings) offers some helpful correctives through three illustrations.

The first illustration in chapter 11 is where we find Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is found. You've probably noticed that Luke 11 does not comprise the exact language that we are used to saying when we trot out the Lord's Prayer. This variance was actually part of Jesus' point. In essence, he was saying to the disciples in every age that we don't have to be preachers or theologians to say prayers. We don't even have to be good at memory work.

Biblical scholars agree that Jesus was trying to offer an example, not provide the be all and end all of prayers. Jesus did *not* say, "When you pray, use exactly these words." Instead, he was saying, "When you pray, say something *like* this..."

The next illustration in Luke's Q&A on prayer seems to be a response to persons who questioned whether God would listen to their prayers. The disciples seemed to feel insignificant in the eyes of God—most likely because weren't used to being taken seriously by the authorities in their time. Why then, they wondered, would the Almighty listen to their prayers?

Jesus' answer to the disciples' question about whether God would listen to their prayers came first in the form of a story. Jesus explained that there was a man who went to a friend's home in the night asking for bread. The friend was so annoying that he finally got up and shared his bread with the caller. He did so, Jesus explained, not so much out of compassion; but because the caller was so persistent. The implied message of this story was that if one person would help a friend in the night who was annoying him, it is all the more likely that God would listen and respond to the disciples' prayers and to our prayers.

The third illustration in chapter 11 responds to the implied question, “*Why* does God answer prayer?”

Jesus’ answer, according to Luke, is that God answers prayer because God is compassionate and merciful.

Jesus says essentially, none of you would give your child a snake if they asked for a fish. None of you would give your child a scorpion if they asked for an egg. No, you and I give our children things that they need, like food. Think how much more God, who is far more capable and compassionate than us, would give to we who are God’s children.

So, there you have it, three of Jesus’ teachings about prayer that are found in Luke’s 11—Luke’s junk drawer on prayer. I wonder, what’s in your junk drawer?

III

Based on previous conversations that I’ve had with some of you, I suspect that many of us would say that our individual and corporate beliefs and spiritual practices are a bit like a junk drawer, and that’s part of the appeal of being associated with Eden and the United Church of Christ. We are junk drawer people with junk drawer theology and junk drawer piety. Again, I ask, what’s in your junk drawer?

When you hear the word “prayer,” do certain thoughts or feelings well up in your head or heart? If so, what are they? Take time to notice them. Notice your thoughts and feelings about prayer.

What have you learned about prayer in your lifetime? What have you learned about prayer from your family of origin, from the church or other spiritual communities in your childhood? What have you learned from others on your spiritual journey as an adult?

What are the prayer practices that you maintain to this day? Do you think you have any? If so, are they nourishing, frustrating, a jumble or a combination of all three?

Do you feel that there are right and wrong answers to my questions about prayer? I hope not. In my view, your answer and my answers are simply the answers that we have for today. It’s OK *not* to have sure-fire answers to any of my questions, and it’s OK if our views change over time, or not, and it’s OK if your views are different from mine.

Regardless of what we think about prayer or how we feel about the practice of prayer, our wellbeing is enhanced by our efforts to ponder the meaning and place

of prayer in our lives, and by trying out new practices and seeing where they lead us.

Our individual answers to the questions I've posed about prayer likely vary depending on things like the type of instruction that we may have received about prayer, what type of prayer practices we have participated in, and which of these practices have (and haven't) been nourishing for us.

Like many of you, I learned about prayer in my childhood home, from family, and from Sunday school and church camp experiences. Some of my earliest memories of prayer include bed time prayers ("Now I lay me down to sleep..."), meal-time prayers ("Come Lord Jesus, be our guest..."), and the Lord's Prayer, which we said in Sunday school and during Sunday worship.

If I really wanted to please my Grandma Nehring, as I child, I would work on saying the Lord's Prayer in Swedish; since in her view, Sweden was a little closer to heaven than Iowa was.

As I progressed through church school, I remember being encouraged to develop my own prayers, both in class and at home. At the end of church school class or a youth gathering, we were often encouraged to reflect silently on our time together and then to name things that we were thankful for and to lift up the names of persons in need.

At church camp, I recall being sent on "morning watch," which was a time for silent meditation and reflection. This was hard work for an extroverted child like me, but good practice and a learning experience for me and others.

The most common way that my family and those around me expressed their prayers was through their deeds. The most ubiquitous example of Christian piety that I experienced as a child is best reflected in the words of the 19th century hymn, "Christian rise and act thy creed; let thy prayer be in thy deed."

I remember my grandparents, particularly my grandmothers, reading the "Daily Bread," a daily devotional that you can pick up here at Eden. I remember my grandmothers and my dad reading and reflecting on hymns in the hymnal. I also remember how Grandma Thomsen would constantly hum hymns while she was working in the garden, cooking in the kitchen, and mending clothing in the evening.

I remember too that my Grandma Nehring regularly encouraged my sister and me to practice our piano lessons. Her fondest hope was that we might one day be able to play any hymn in the hymnal at the drop of a hat, and be talented enough to play the piano for church.

In addition to learning about conventional prayer practices, I began to realize rather intuitively by my teenage years that singing and playing music and reading and writing poetry were other forms of prayer—not just prayer forms for famous poets and gifted musicians, but even for private poets and not-so-gifted musicians like me.

My college and graduate school education and international experience as a young adult introduced me to an abundance of prayer practices that stretched my imagination and my spiritual life, more than any previous experiences in life, I am grateful for those.

Probably the most helpful insights about my own spirituality came from reading a book in seminary called *Original Vision* by Edward Robinson. Robinson's book, which is a study of the spiritual life of children in the United Kingdom, took me back to my childhood and affirmed the prayer practices which were most natural for me then (and now)—practices that were awakened by my experiences in nature, and with the arts. Until reading Robinson's book, I had never associated those spiritual experiences and my own artistic endeavors with Christian spirituality—except for maybe a few experiences at church camp. And, truth be told, I thought that those experiences were simply part of my childhood, and not necessarily to be associated with a mature spiritual life. How wrong I was, and how right it was to be introduced to Robinson's helpful corrective.

Since graduating from seminary, my journey has progressed and happily I can say that I've continued to embrace new and different (to me) prayer practices. Many of these have come through my acquaintance with spiritual practices that emerged in the Middle Ages—many of which are still practiced in Roman Catholic and Episcopalian traditions. Some others have come through introductions to the spiritual practices of other great religions.

I am reminded, for example, of a saying that my friend Rabbi David Castiglinoi, from Detroit, Michigan, once said to me, "There are many paths up the same mountain." In other words, there are many paths, many prayer practices, that lead us to the same God, even if we call God by different names.

I believe that David is correct. There are many paths and many practices that lead us up the same mountain. Learning from other traditions can help us—not only discover more about our friends and neighbors whose religious traditions may be different from our own—but these experiences can also help us discover more about ourselves and the traditions out of which we have come.

IV

So that's enough about me. What about you?

I hope this brief description of my spiritual practices and how they've been influenced and evolved have gotten you to reflect on your own spiritual experiences and practices, and to ponder what of those have been helpful or not to you, what you may wish to reclaim or deepen, and perhaps even what new directions you may want to pursue.

So what's in your spiritual junk drawer? Are there practices that you want to reclaim and put to use or reconfigure, or is it time to try something new?

I'm interested. Let me know. And if you are looking for a spiritual companion on the way, trust that there is a room full of people here ready and willing to travel with you, and the God whom we worship will gladly accompany you. Amen.