

Skepticism and Prayer
A Sermon by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
March 3, 2013
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

THE MORNING READING

“Satan’s Letter” by Mark Twain

The great American writer and social satirist Mark Twain has left an indelible mark on English literature and the collective American psyche. In his writing, he has plenty to say about many things, including religion. Our reading for the morning was written by Mark Twain and imagines that Satan—the one with the red horns and pointy tail—has descended from heaven to check out Earth and observe the human beings living there. Once on Earth, Satan writes a series of letters back to his buddies in heaven, the archangels Michael and Gabriel. For your pleasure, a selection from “Satan’s Letter” from Mark Twain’s Letters from the Earth, adapted.

This is a strange place, an extraordinary place, and interesting. There is nothing resembling it at home. The people are all insane, the other animals are all insane, the earth is insane, Nature itself is insane. A human being is a marvelous curiosity. When they are at their very best they are a sort of low-grade nickel-plated angel; at their worst they are unspeakable, unimaginable; and first and last and all the time they are a sarcasm. Yet humans blandly and in all sincerity call themselves the “noblest work of God.” . . . Moreover—if I may put another strain upon you—human beings think they are the Creator’s pet. They believe the Creator is proud of them; they even believe the Creator loves them; has a passion for them; sits up nights to admire them, yes, and watch over them and keep them out of trouble. Humans pray to God, and think God listens. Isn’t it a quaint idea? They fill their prayers with crude and bald and florid flatteries of the Creator, and think God sits and purrs over these extravagancies and enjoys them. They pray for help, and favor, and protection, every day; and do it with hopefulness and confidence, too, although no prayer of theirs has ever been answered. The daily affront, the daily defeat, do not discourage them, they go on praying just the same. There is something almost fine about this perseverance.

THE SERMON

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Friday morning, US Airlines Flight 3590. Half-way through the flight, it was as if Satan himself had suddenly come on board, or at the very least, that horned harbinger of horror was holding a demonic dance party on the plane's wings.

Our first warning that trouble was brewing came when the "Fasten your seatbelts" lights blinked on. Moments later a tense-voiced stewardess announced, "Due to stronger than usual turbulence, all beverage service will be immediately suspended; the cabin will be prepared for landing." Being that we were still about an hour away from the airport, I did not take this as a good sign.

All at once, the plane seemed caught in a cosmic tug-of-war between metal machinery and Mother Nature. It began with a sudden dip that made your stomach flip-flop and your just-eaten bag of peanuts rush back up towards your throat. Everyone on board shared a collective gasp. Two hundred fists clenched simultaneously. And then the bouncing began.

Life is often like that. We're flying along. Seat belt is unfastened. We're reading a good book, we're snacking on some peanuts, we feel we're heading toward our destination. And suddenly, without warning...the bouncing begins. Something (body, mind, spirit, situation) is out of control. Life as we know it is at risk. We fasten our seatbelts, we hold on, but we wonder what will hold us as things go shaky. We've all been there. Some of us are there now. All of us will be there sometime in the future.

Back on Flight 3590, the woman seated next to me suddenly asks, "Are you a doctor?" Hoping she isn't about to suffer from motion sickness, I pull away ever so slightly and answer her, "No, I'm not." She says, "You're reading medical journals and I thought you were a doctor." "Actually, I'm a minister," I say. "I'm writing a sermon about prayer, and I'm reading the latest scientific research on whether prayer is at all effective." She cuts me off before I can finish the sentence. "Of course prayer is effective. Prayer helps!" she snaps at me. "You pray to the Lord, and the Lord answers you. You don't need a scientific study to tell you that!" She shoots me a look that says, "What kind of minister are you?"

Fifty-four percent of Americans report they pray on a daily basis, and Twenty-nine percent report they pray more than once a day. Eighty-seven percent of Americans believe that God answers their prayers at least some of the time.¹

The notion that God is an external being that we entreat is the very thing Mark Twain attacks in his book, *Letters from the Earth*. The idea that humanity beseeches a Higher Power, believing that God will intervene in the day-to-day routine of earthly life, seems ludicrous to Mark Twain. For him, the idea that prayer actually does something is a fallacy. Twain writes, "[Humanity]

prays to God, and thinks God listens . . . They pray for help, and favor, and protection . . . and do it with hopefulness and confidence . . . although no prayer . . . has ever been answered.”

Some of us take great offense at this statement. For some of us, God or Goddess or Creator is something very real, something with whom we can connect for strength and guidance. For some of us, this power is real. Some of us agree with Twain. The idea of God or a Higher Power as cosmic prayer-listener is pure superstition. It is, as Joseph Campbell writes, a “pathological mythology.” Others of us see Higher Power not as an external Being to whom we pray, but as an internal wisdom that we can awaken and access to inform and animate our lives. For others, Higher Power is an energy flow within and between all living things. Still others of us aren’t sure, or perhaps even don’t care.

Dr. Larry Dossey has extensively studied the power of prayer—specifically, intercessory prayer. In intercessory prayer, someone at some distance prays for the well-being of someone else. Guiding his study was this question: “Can [we] mentally influence, voluntarily and purposefully, at a distance, the psychological and/or physiological status of another living being?”ⁱⁱ In simple terms, “Can one person’s thoughts influence another biological system at a distance?”ⁱⁱⁱ Science calls this *focused intentionality*.

Exploring prayer as focused intention eliminates for a moment the debate over God or no-God. It focuses on the human intention behind prayer. It focuses on the human ability to direct our mind and impact the world. It looks at the *result* of prayer, rather than being tied down in the mechanics of prayer.

Compiling scientific research from around the world, Dr. Dossey sought to discover whether any effects of focused intentionality truly existed. He first asked, “Could our mind [our prayer, as it were] affect the most basic forms of life?”^{iv} Studies were conducted on fungus cultures. One study asked people to use thought or desire to increase the growth of yeast in test tubes. The study produced significant results.^v In another study, “people tried to inhibit the growth of fungus cultures . . . through conscious intent. Of a total of 194 culture dishes, 151 showed slowed growth.”^{vi} Other studies again and again suggested the mind’s ability to impede or stimulate the growth of life within cultures of bacteria.

Moving beyond simple living organisms, Dossey asked if such an effect could influence higher life forms. Again study results were positive. Mice recovered more quickly from anesthesia when healers offered that mental intent.^{vii} Other studies show that wounds healed faster on mice toward whom healing was mentally directed.^{viii}

But it is with humans that the results of prayer hit most powerfully. In 1988, there was study involving 393 persons admitted to the coronary care unit at San Francisco General Hospital. Unbeknownst to any of them, intercessory prayer was offered for half the patients. The study was designed according to rigid scientific criteria, and none of the patients knew they were being intentionally prayed for, thus eliminating any chance for the power of suggestion. The study found that the “prayed-for” patients were five times less likely than the “unprayed-for” group to require antibiotics; and they were three times less likely to develop pulmonary edema, a condition in which the lungs fill with fluid. They also had fewer pulmonary arrests. None of the

prayed-for group required a mechanical ventilator.^{ix} Using hernia patients, the study was replicated in Israel. Again, the prayed-for patients showed significantly fewer complications and a much quicker recovery time than the group who were not prayed for.^x

Says Dr. Dossey, “If the technique being studied had been a new drug or surgical procedure instead of prayer, it would almost certainly have been heralded as some sort of ‘breakthrough.’ Even some hardboiled skeptics agreed on the significance of [the] findings. Dr. William Nolan, who has written a book debunking faith healing, acknowledged, ‘It sounds like this study will stand up to scrutiny . . . Maybe we doctors ought to be writing on our order sheets, ‘Pray three times a day.’”^{xi}

The research continued. A study published thirteen years ago in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* replicated these same results with 990 coronary care patients. Another study, published in the *Western Journal of Medicine*, conducted with 40 advanced AIDS patients, found that distant healing resulted in fewer doctor visits, hospitalizations, and AIDS-related illnesses.^{xii}

The implications of this science of prayer has potentially staggering implications. This is not just cold science. This pulses with the warmth of the human heart. Researcher Dr. Marilyn Schlitz says, “We assume we that we are isolated beings. In fact, this data supports the idea that we are interconnected at a level that has yet to be fully recognized by Western science and that is very far from being integrated into our world view. If [our] intentions can influence the physiology of a distant person, if your thoughts can be incorporated into mine, not just in clinical settings but everywhere, it requires that we be more thoughtful and responsible with other people . . . The real challenge that faces us is how to learn more about the nature of the human condition and how we can create ourselves as fuller and more complete human beings.”^{xiii}

With this research, it really seemed like something was happening in prayer. Something was connecting one mind to another. Something was connecting one life to another. Perhaps it was God. Perhaps it was energy flowing between us. Perhaps, as quantum physics suggests, consciousness might not reside in the individual brain, but rather beyond the body in an infinite field of possibility—perhaps there are many individual brains, but one collective mind.

But then a monkey wrench was thrown into all this data.

Seven years ago, in April of 2006, the *American Heart Journal* published the long-awaited results of a ten-year study of patients undergoing heart surgery, conducted by Dr. Herbert Benson of Boston’s Mind/Body Medical Institute. According to the *New York Times*, this study was “the most scientifically rigorous investigation of whether prayer can heal illness.”^{xiv} Dr. Suzanne Koven from Massachusetts General Hospital summarized the findings in the *Boston Globe*, saying, “The prayers did not seem to improve the patient’s outcomes. Interestingly, if the patients were told they were being prayed for, they had more postoperative complications.”^{xv} This study suggests that prayer doesn’t make a difference, and that knowing you are being prayed for is actually harmful to your health. Ugh. This study raises more questions than it answers. The leaders of the study plan to collect more data through new scientific research.

I *want* to believe that our focused intention—the collective impact of our minds’ concentration—can influence things on a cellular level. But depending on how you interpret the latest scientific data, the jury could be still out on that issue.

But there is one thing I do know about prayer. There is one thing I do know about taking the time to connect within to our sense of caring for another person. Prayer—acknowledging our concern for someone else—may not change someone else’s external circumstances, but it can change us. It can change how we *are*, *how we feel*. It can refocus us on what matters. It can reconnect us to the deep compassion that lives within each of us. It can recall us to our best selves again. It can return us to love. And we don’t need a scientific study to tell us that!

In the novel *Where the Rainbow Ends*, author Jameson Currier writes a scene in a hospital. A caretaker, worn from the ongoing illness of a friend, meets a nurse:

On his sixth day in the hospital, just as things had begun to look better, Nathan started running another fever. He kept floating in and out of exhausted sleep. I felt certain the infection was spreading.

That evening, before leaving to go back to the apartment, I sat in the hospital lobby not really ready to leave, my mind a heavy cloud of details, and I sat there trying to sort through things, wanting someone to just tell me what to do.

What is the meaning of life when life disappoints you? Where does faith come from when you are all out of strength? How could I accept the false romanticism of religion when faced with the harsh disappointments of facts?

I looked up and there was the Jamaican nurse. She carried a paper cup of coffee and as she sat down beside me I watched a thin stream of steam rise and disappear. I was not really ready for a conversation with anyone and I felt my eyes move away from her.

“Do you pray?” she asked.

“No,” I answered, and I was not in the mood, either, to be preached to.

“I don’t know much about God,” she said. “Who does, really? But praying keeps me low, you know?”

“Low?” I asked.

“Level. Calm. If you don’t pray to God,” she said, “then pray to love. Make God what you need God to be for you. But pray that you keep the love.”

She stood and flattened out her skirt.

“Pray,” she said again before she left. “It’s a good way to learn.”

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.

ⁱ *Newsweek*, March 31, 1997, p. 46

ⁱⁱ Dossey, Larry, MD, “Prayer as Distant Intentionality: An Idea Whose Time Has Come,” as presented Dec. 14-16, 1997 at the Harvard Medical School’s *Spirituality and Healing in Medicine-IV*, p. 1

ⁱⁱⁱ Schlitz, Marilyn J., PhD, “Possible Healing Effects of Intercessory Prayer and Distant Intentionality,” as presented Dec. 14-16, 1997 at the Harvard Medical School’s *Spirituality and Healing in Medicine-IV*, p. 1

^{iv} Dossey, op. cit., p. 2

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Dossey, Larry, MD, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (Harper Paperbacks, 1993), p. 268

^{ix} Dossey, “Prayer as Distant Intentionality” and Dossey, *Healing Words*, p. 249

^x Schlitz, op. cit., p. 3

^{xi} Dossey, *Healing Words*, p. 250

^{xii} *Yoga Journal*, November/December 2000, p. 31

^{xiii} Schlitz, op. cit., p. 4

^{xiv} *New York Times*, March 31, 2006

^{xv} *Boston Globe*, January 28, 2013