

# ***When You Haven't Got a Prayer***

Sermon by Rev. Mark Stringer

Delivered at

All Souls

Unitarian Universalist Church

Kansas City, Missouri

[allsoulskc.org](http://allsoulskc.org)

December 4, 2005

## Readings

FIVE BLIND MEN, by David Roth

When walking in the woods one day,  
Five blind men following me,  
We came upon an elephant  
Just resting in a glade.

"What have we here," the blind men cried,  
For none had ever seen one.  
"An elephant," was my reply,  
"Just sitting in the shade."

"An elephant," I did explain, "Is  
Big and friendly, gray and slow.  
An elephant does not forget.  
It sprays things with its nose."

Before I could continue on,  
The five blind men had found it,  
And moving with their hands and ears,  
Had made their way around it.

The first blind man had found its leg,  
And proudly he concluded  
An elephant is like a tree.  
It's strong and firm and rooted.

The second blind man said,  
"Hold on, that's not what I have here."  
For he was feeling 'round the tusk  
And called the beast a spear.

The third blind man was in the front,  
Clinging to a trunkly nose.  
"It's neither spear nor tree," said he,  
"An elephant's a hose."

And 'round the other way beside  
A giant ear, the fourth blind man  
Stroking, found it wide and flat  
And much more like a fan.

And lastly, bringing up the rear,  
The fifth blind man did grab and grope,  
And playing with the tail declared  
The elephant a rope.

And just right then, our gentle friend,  
Not used to such attention,  
Got up to stretch and move a bit,  
and turn a ways around.

But when he sat back down again,  
The parts were out of order,  
And each blind man was feeling parts  
The other four had found.

The first said, "Wait, what was a tree  
Now feels much more like a spear."  
The second said, "That's what I thought,  
But now a hose is here."

The third, who thought he'd held the hose,  
Was fondling now a fan,

Which, incidentally was a rope now  
To the fourth blind man.

The fifth blind man, who'd held the tail,  
Was now beside a leg, you see.  
So what he thought had been a rope,  
Was suddenly a tree.

And all at once, the five blind men  
Began to laugh and shout,  
And realized that each was right,  
Then joyfully stomped about.

"An elephant," they sweetly sang,  
"Is all these things and much, much more,  
The sum of which is greater than  
The parts we felt before."

"It just depends on where you stand,"  
They said and then they turned  
To thank the gentle giant for  
The lesson they had learned.

So off we went, the five blind men and me  
Out in the wood,  
But this time, I was following them  
As humbly as I could.

For they had blessed me with a gift,  
A sparkling truth revealed:  
Whatever you might think you see  
Depends on where you stand  
And how you feel.

Reading: an excerpt from W. S. Merwin's poem "Thanks"

Listen

with the night falling we are saying thank you  
we are stopping on the bridge to bow from the railings  
we are running out of the glass rooms  
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky  
and say thank you  
we are standing by the water looking out  
in different directions

back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging  
after funerals we are saying thank you  
after the news of the dead  
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you  
in a culture up to its chin in shame  
living in the stench it has chosen we are saying thank you

over telephones we are saying thank you  
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators  
remembering wars and the police at the back door  
and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you  
in the banks that use us we are saying thank you  
with the crooks in office with the rich and fashionable  
unchanged we go on saying thank you thank you

with the animals dying around us  
our lost feelings we are saying thank you  
with the forests falling faster than the minutes  
of our lives we are saying thank you  
with the words going out like cells of a brain  
with the cities growing over us like the earth

we are saying thank you faster and faster  
with nobody listening we are saying thank you  
we are saying thank you and waving  
dark though it is

**Reading** "On Prayer" by Czeslaw Milosz (translated by Robert Hass)

You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.  
All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge  
And walking it we are aloft, as on a springboard,  
Above landscapes the color of ripe gold  
Transformed by a magic stopping of the sun.  
That bridge leads to the shore of Reversal  
Where everything is just the opposite and the word *is*  
Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.  
Notice: I say *we*; there, every one, separately,  
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh  
And knows that if there is no other shore  
They will walk that aerial bridge all the same.

## **Sermon**

The church I serve [the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines] is a member of AMOS, which stands for "A Metropolitan Organizing Strategy", a broad-based organization of area churches that seeks to be a voice for social justice and non-partisan political action in metro Des Moines. Early in my involvement with AMOS, before most members of the church knew about AMOS at all, I attended a three-day training, where the organizing principles were described. I attended this training to see for myself if AMOS were something the church

might get behind. In the opening moments of the first session, the sixty people present were asked to bow our heads in prayer.

These days, being asked to pray is not really a big deal for me. I've grown accustomed to the request, as prayer is a common feature in these kinds of interfaith gatherings. As a minister, I also like to see how the person leading the prayer attends to the fact that there are people of different faiths present. Sometimes I am inspired by the grace and skill with which the prayer leader can leave space for everyone in the room. But, other times, more often than not I'm afraid, I am disappointed that the speaker uses language that effectively excludes some people in the room. This is what happened at the AMOS training. I don't recall the exact content of the prayer, but I'm sure it began with words like "Heavenly Father" and included phrases like "help us do your will."

Immediately, I was concerned. Not because I couldn't translate the patriarchal language into something that fit my own theology, and not because I had a problem with the idea that a group of people from mostly Christian churches would want to begin a meeting by praying, (duh!) and that they would do so using Christian language. I was concerned because I was imagining the reactions of some of the church members to this kind of prayer. I figured AMOS would be a difficult sell to the congregation if prayer, especially prayer using traditional Christian language, were a foundational aspect of the organization.

Throughout the three-day training, I discovered that while prayer was often used to begin and end sessions, the driving force of AMOS was not God language and prayer, but political

engagement, or in other words, human interaction. By the end of the training, I was convinced that the church could and should play a role in AMOS. I just hoped we wouldn't be scared away by the praying before we could commit.

I knew it was possible that we might be scared away because there was a time when I know I would have been. I would have assumed that if a prayer were spoken, particularly one steeped in Christian language, there might not be room for me. Maybe some of you have been there yourselves. You have gathered at a public function or with more traditionally devout family or friends and someone says, "Let us pray." Immediately your guard goes up and you look for ways to be offended. You may feel excluded and alone. And even if you wanted to join in prayer or at least just roll with it, your mind gets so caught up in some of the language being used that the prayer, which is intended to be a time of centering and focus, becomes anything but centering...and any focus you had is now gone. I've been there, feeling offended and alone, and I think I have come through to the other side, to a place where I'm open and more curious about what I have in common with the person offering the prayer than despairing about what I don't. This morning I will be sharing a few of my experiences with prayer and what I have learned along the way. I share these stories not to imply that your views of prayer should end up where mine are, but simply to suggest through my own example that life offers us opportunities for movement on matters of religion...that there are, of course, many ways to view the same reality...and that there is the possibility that our views can change and our perspectives can open to those of others, even when they may have seemed radically different from our own. Being willing to have our perspectives altered enough to leave room for others is, for me, the true locus of the divine...the place where the real

holy work occurs...the work that helps us bridge what divides us and brings us back to the common ground that is the deep and infinite mystery of our shared life.

Some stories...

I was raised in Methodist and Presbyterian churches where prayer was an important element of the weekly service. The things I most remember about the lengthy prayers offered by the ministers of these churches, were the cadence of their voices and the repetition of key phrases. I seldom listened to the content of the prayers. I remember struggling to keep my eyes closed and I could rarely do it for the entire prayer. I suppose the sociologist in me was too interested in seeing what everyone else was doing.

As a child, I sometimes prayed, but even at an early age, I wasn't really sure to whom I was praying. My younger sister had an imaginary friend named "Sasha" who she said lived in the fireplace. At the time, God was about as real to me as Sasha, so praying seemed like a game...one that didn't really hold my interest.

As I grew into adolescence, I began to understand that God was something that people took seriously, certainly more seriously than Sasha, and that maybe I should, too. So in times when life seemed to be reeling out of control, I would lie in my bed at night and pray. For example, when I was twelve and we moved to a new town and I missed the friends I had left behind and wondered if I would ever make new ones, I prayed for help. When my mother began having bouts with a debilitating depression that left her in tears and unable to do even basic tasks, I prayed that she would find comfort. Mostly these

prayers were offered when I didn't know what else to do, when it seemed the only way to get any peace at all in the midst of tears and sorrow was to offer my concern to something bigger than myself. All the same, I couched my prayers in terms of uncertainty. They would usually go something like this:

"Dear God, whatever, whoever, wherever you are. I know I don't talk to you very much. I know I always come to you when I don't know what else to do and I'm always asking for stuff and never saying thank you, but, I figure, if you are really up there, you understand. Please be with mom. Help her feel better. Help us all through this. Amen."

Other than occasional prayers for my mother, I don't remember praying as a teen-ager or young adult. I had become a literalist, a slave to rational consistency. I decided that if I couldn't be certain that God exists, then I shouldn't pray. I made an exception in the case of my mother, because I knew that she believed in God. I figured that I could pray to her God, since I was praying for her.

I don't know if my prayers ever did anything for my mom. Over the next few years she cycled through several rounds of depression, which tragically ended with her suicide. So evidence would seem to indicate that my prayers didn't help her, but who really knows? I think my prayers did help me, however. They sometimes enabled me to get to sleep, which was no small thing. Praying was a way to say to myself, "This problem is much bigger than me." It was a way to put aside my concern or sadness for at least a moment. It didn't really matter that I didn't know to whom or to what I was praying. Just hearing myself ask for help had a way of making me feel better. I read recently that one meaning of the term prayer is "to trap a

thought.” I think this is what I was doing when I prayed for my mom. I was trying to contain what felt like uncontrollable sorrow.

By my junior year of college I had discovered existentialism, the philosophical view that denies that the universe has any intrinsic meaning or purpose and requires individuals to take responsibility for their own actions and share their own destinies. Existentialism corresponded with my own experience of the world at that time, particularly the absurd fact that my mother, the most religiously devout member of my family, committed suicide, while in a home just a few miles away from ours, the mother of my high school girlfriend was dying from Alzheimer’s Disease. I wondered how the world could have any meaning if the people we love could be so cruelly taken away from us. To pray, I figured, I had to believe in a force that was directing all of this suffering and pain. But life seemed too random to be under anyone’s control. With some anger and frustration, and I suppose, some arrogance, I rejected religion.

When, several years later, as a favor to a friend from college, I was singing in the choir of an Episcopal church in Staten Island, I was inspired to rethink my adamant stance against religion. The priest was talking in a sermon about not worrying so much about what we don’t believe, and focusing instead on what we do believe. While I still considered myself an agnostic and believed that life does not have intrinsic meaning, I acknowledged that if any meaning were to exist, it would have to be a product of how we live our lives today: the commitments we make to ourselves and to each other and the love that we create in the world. I believed there must be a place where I could explore these commitments with other

folks. A few months later I found Unitarian Universalism, and obviously, I found what I had been looking for.

However, even after I had opened myself up to religion again, I still had walls built up against prayer. I remember during my internship at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, when one of my duties was to craft and present the liturgy that surrounded the sermon each week...including the prayer to which the congregation was accustomed, I had some difficulty. One Sunday, early in my internship, after I had led one of my early attempts at a prayer, I returned to my seat next to my supervisor while everyone was singing a hymn. She leaned over to me in between verses and said "Mark that was a decent piece of prose, but it wasn't a prayer." We sang another line and I stewed. "Why not?" I asked, probably sounding a little hurt. "There was no invocation," she said just before she left for the pulpit.

I didn't hear much of her sermon that morning because I was lost in thought. It was one of many times I would question my fitness for the ministry. How could I give an invocation when I wasn't sure what I was invoking? The next week I searched for an invocation that would not contradict my own theology, scattered and incomplete as it was. I settled on "Spirit of Life, Mystery beyond understanding, known by many names spoken and unspoken" words similar to the ones I still speak most Sundays when I lead the meditation time in Des Moines. I like this invocation because it leaves room for people like me, people who believe that we are forever limited in our understanding of the world, just as the blind men in the story I shared earlier were limited in their understanding of the elephant.

While I learned a lot about prayer during my internship, I think I learned the most about prayer from an elderly woman I only knew for a short time, a woman named Winnie who probably didn't know she was teaching me about prayer. But she did. And I have not forgotten the lesson.

I met Winnie one night in the cancer ward of a Chicago hospital during my summer as a hospital chaplain. Before I tell you more about my encounter with Winnie, though, you should know that when I began my work as a chaplain, I was concerned about my ability to meet the needs of the patients I would encounter. I knew that I would see very few Unitarian Universalists and that the bulk of my work would be with those holding more orthodox theologies. "How would I pray with them?" I wondered. And if I did, how could I maintain my ministerial integrity if I were to offer prayers that didn't fit with my own theology? As it turns out, praying with patients was easy. I quickly learned that I was there to be a conduit between the patients and their God. They would see me how they wanted to see me, and they would translate my own attempts at prayer to fit their needs. This was clearly evident when one patient told me after we had chatted for a while and prayed together, "I'm so glad they sent you and not one of those damned liberals."

I was called to Winnie's room late in the evening. I had grown to appreciate these evening visits with patients, when the hospital was mostly quiet, the visitors had gone home, and the lights were low. It was a time for soft conversation with folks who, by virtue of their circumstances, often had some wisdom to share. I always felt privileged to be with these patients, a virtual stranger invited to be a witness to their journeys.

After Winnie explained to me that the doctors had told her that she didn't have long to live and that she would be moved to hospice the next day, I asked her if she wanted to pray. She smiled and nodded. I began the prayer like most of the others I had learned to say: "Dear God," I said, "be with Winnie tonight..." but before I could get out much else, Winnie was smiling and responding "Yes Jesus...sweet Jesus." I took her cue and began speaking of Jesus, asking him to be with Winnie in her time of need. But every time I asked Jesus to help, Winnie would say "thank you, Jesus." We continued our call and response prayer for several minutes. Winnie was rocking and smiling and glowing...and there was a peacefulness about her that was undeniable. Somewhere in that exchange of religious language and thankfulness, I began to "get it." Prayer did not require theological consistency or even reasonable possibility. Prayer could simply be a means to acknowledge one's circumstances, to open oneself to mystery and to find some comfort in times when comfort might be difficult to come by. At the core of the prayerful dance of words I shared with Winnie that night was also the sentiment embedded in all prayers, I think. "Thank you." Thank you to this life...thank you to one's god or understanding of the divine...thank you to it all.

These days, when I am in situations where prayers are shared, I don't worry so much about the speakers' invocation or their theology or even their refusal to leave room for my perspective. I try to hear the "thank you." I humbly translate the language that may be incompatible with my piece of the elephant. I pay attention with my most well-tuned UU perspective for the inherent worth and dignity of the speaker and try to see myself in their universal, human yearnings for connection, peace, forgiveness and redemption. It's not so difficult, really. I just

try to give other people a break, to not judge so harshly, and to not take my understanding of the mystery so seriously.

So what happened with AMOS? Well, I know for a fact that some church members did bristle at least a few times at the prayers, especially at their first meeting to two. But I'm proud to say that the prayers didn't scare them enough to keep us from committing, and our church has become a leader in the organization, which, I think is how it should be. After all, Unitarian Universalists should be especially open to interfaith organizations, since one of our greatest strengths as a movement—at least in principle—is our acceptance of the free and responsible search for meaning for *all* individuals, even if that search leads us down different paths.

One Sunday morning about two years after we got involved in AMOS, a long-time member stood up during an open-mike reflection time and witnessed in a simple statement to his own developing understanding of interfaith work...an understanding, that to me anyway, made our involvement in AMOS worth it, even if it had ended that morning. He said: "I used to think that Christians were good people despite their faith. Now I know that they are good people because of their faith."

And I'm guessing that somewhere, in another church in town, a Methodist or a Catholic or a Presbyterian was probably saying something similar about these surprisingly faithful Unitarian Universalists they had gotten to know.

Everywhere real interfaith interaction takes place, this holy work goes on...and hearts and minds continue to open. The kind of opening that doesn't just change one person's perspective. This is the kind of opening that could bring us together despite

all that divides us. This is the kind of opening that could change the world. In fact, it already has...at least for several members of a growing, risk-taking, Unitarian Universalist congregation in Des Moines, Iowa.

So to conclude this morning, I ask you to pause with me for a prayer, even if you think you haven't got one...even this one.

Spirit of life, mystery beyond understanding, that which transcends words and human comprehension,  
You know we don't talk to you very much and you know we always come to you when we don't know what else to do and we're always asking for stuff and never saying thank you, but,

Help us to not be too rigid in our always limited understandings of this life we share,

Give us a sense of humor about religious matters because if we can't laugh at ourselves, we are missing out on too much fun.

Teach us to be playful with language and respectful of those who find meaning in ideas that we find confusing.

Encourage us to search for the commonality between ourselves and those of other religions.

Oh, and one more thing before we let you go for now...

Thank you...

Thank you...

Thank you.

Amen.