

Prayer

I'm scared to death as usual when I have to speak about what I have to speak about – even more so today.

My mind recently went back to Anaximander, who, if I am right, was the radical pre-Socratic philosopher who held to a monistic understanding of the primary substance in the universe. I've known for some time and have confessed it that a new kind of Platonism is welling up within me, transposed hopefully into the post-modern world. I've been very clear for years about radical monotheism; but that's something different from monism. Now I'm finding a bee buzzing around in my mind that tends to make me a post-modern monist. This is indicated by suggesting that there's only one reality in the world, and that's spirituality. I've got to call everything else unreality. There is only one substance (that word has not been easy for me for thirty years, but I can use it now), but it's spiritual substance. Everything else is non-substance. This I suppose is what Kazantzakis is trying to get hold of when he says that our task is to transpose matter into Spirit. Matter, as he uses it there, is unreality made into reality.

I wish like anything that we didn't have to do all those things that we have to do, so that all of us could go aside and study. Where I want to study is in the practical aspect of the development of the People of God in history. Forgetting their great intellectual struggle and wisdom, I want to know how they took that and shaped what I'm trying to call spiritual substance, in the sense of practical sociological forms in history. I wish I could go back to Leo I, get to know him, for he's the one that carved out that gigantic machinery we call Roman Catholicism. I wish I knew more about Benedict. I wish I knew more about Huss. I wish I knew more about Wesley, although I know more about him than most of you. I wish I knew more about Calvin and what he did sociologically in Geneva, practically, where he took stuff and created spiritual substance out of it.

We are taking the stuff of the decadent church and using that to create the new spiritual substance sociologically in our time. Spiritually I've never left the local congregation. Indeed, I feel like I've been hammered, blow by blow for twenty years, deeper into the local congregation. But I've left it in terms of the detachment that was necessary to see it as an utterly objective vehicle that can be used to give sociological form to the spiritual substance that has to be created. Therefore, there's no romanticism. If you've got some sentimentality left in you about the local parish, you'd better not go back there. This has got to be a hardheaded, revolutionary spiritual posture, this creating spiritual substance. Renewing the local congregation is creating spiritual reality.

The irony in all of this is that you only do stuff; you only fool with stuff. A spirit person's a funny thing. We want to go away and be Spirit. But that's always denied us. We've got to be dealing with just plain old stuff. We fool with stuff in order that others may participate in the spiritual reality that's being built. That's the key and the fright underneath all the fears that we have.

Prayer Is Radical

I want to talk about prayer. I want to talk about prayer as radical happening. I want to talk about prayer as radical tactic. I want to talk about prayer as radical combat. The New Religious

Mode (see chart, pg. 117) is nonsense if anyone can be human outside of it. I used to think prayer was something you could do or not do and still be human. If it is, then we ought to say, "The Lord is with you," leave the room and the whole damn outfit forever.

For awhile I was thinking, "How in the world could I be motivated to go and bring off a local congregation?" That's the wrong way to put it. I've got to be the New Religious Mode, and the tactics for the local church will take care of themselves. Tactics have to be transposed through my unrepeatable being, through your unrepeatable being, into the New Religious Mode. I tell you, what's ahead is no job for boys and girls. It's a job for spiritual men and women, spiritual giants. If you are not, don't go out and try to be giants. The hell with that! You're not trying to grow yourself up in the sense that you can pick yourself up by your own bootstraps. It's something far deeper than that. The New Religious Mode is the reality that you have to bring into being.

These three - prayer, doing, and obedience - are utterly inseparable. You can't put them sequentially. They have to be there all at once. Save I know what radical obedience is, then I cannot pray. Those of you who open your mouths during worship and let prayers flow out as if you were spitting, I call you into question. A prayer - I don't mean what flows out of our mouths - only comes out of radical obedience. It's in the midst of obedience and prayer that one begins to sense what eschatological doing does to the journey.

Radical Happening

Prayer, first of all, is happening. Nothing ever happened in this world, only prayer. Prayer is happening. Nothing ever happened in this world, only prayer. This is why when we were first trying to ground this category in humanness, we said it was action. It's the action down underneath the action, a happening transposing action into deed. What I mean by happening here is the action underneath the action that transposes action into deed.

We've also said that prayer is freedom. I laugh as I think back through some twenty-five years of people fooling with the word "freedom." They want to be free. They want to vote on this or that. They want to have a chance to express themselves. They want to have a chance in a course to dialogue with the teacher. This is freedom? No, freedom is only prayer. When you talk about freedom, you're talking about the nothingness at the center of your being, and out of that nothingness comes something. Freedom is a happening. It is the happening before the act that transforms the act into the deed.

Prayer is literally creating out of nothing. When I was in seminary we used to have silly debates about whether or not man instead of God could create out of nothing. I insist that what in our day they've meant when they discovered afresh that man does not *have* freedom, he *is* freedom, is precisely that - that only when you bring to be that which never was before are you freedom. And to bring to be what never was is prayer, nothing else. This is why we've been very clear through the years that the most painful task was that of prayer. Prayer is creativity. To turn this around, creativity is prayer.

Turn it around. Freedom *is* prayer. Can you for a moment just blast everything that your Sunday school teachers or anybody else ever said that prayer was and begin to get a new peek? A happening is prayer. When was the last time you happened to happen? Well, think of it. Then you prayed.

Prayer is that going-onness in which the Mystery becomes tangible as mystery. One of the greatest postures that Carl Michaelson ever took in history is that "revelation is God revealing his unrevealedness." I like that. This isn't anything abstract. Prayer is the manifestation of the Mystery as mystery. This is why when you want to define in a little box what prayer is, you

never can do it, because prayer is filled full of mystery. Do you understand that? Without that mystery, it is not prayer. Prayer is the irrational of the irrational – what did you think we meant when we called it freedom? What did you think we meant when we called it sheer creativity?

It's a funny thing. Nobody ever prayed until at that moment he or she was overcome by the Mystery. When you were overcome by the suffering of the people in Africa and you prayed, you did not pray. Mark you, that's a fine upstanding human feeling, but I'm talking about prayer.

I like to repeat what that submarine commander in World War I said, the one who became a cleric, Niemöller. He was the first German theologian we let back into this country after the war. His one word was that the church is never substantial, it's a dynamic. The church never exists; it becomes. Snap your fingers and we're the church. Snap them again and there isn't any church any more. That's the dynamic in history.

You could come at this a million different ways. Nobody has got the guts to create anything, save he stands on the shoulders of colleagues from the beginning of humanness itself. If Gautama walks not with thee, if Richard Niebuhr is not more real to you than your own brother, if Amos has not long since stood one step ahead, you never created anything, and you never prayed.

There's no such thing as prayer without contemplation. There's no such thing as prayer without meditation. I hope you don't think I mean sitting around brooding, or sitting around contemplating. That has its place, but here you're dealing with the ontological reality and not the exercise.

Radical Tactics

Prayer is a happening, the only happening. Prayer is tactics.

I had a little fun with the second tallest man in our Order. I heard him praying in the Daily Office about the region here in Chicago. What I've been waiting for when I go in his office is a chart, about the size of the wall, to be up in there of a battle plan of how they're going to do something about the region. I won't know for sure if he's really praying in the Daily Office if the plan's not there. If "there" is only in his mind, then I am absolutely sure he's not praying, for prayer is tactics. Prayer is the most difficult human going-onness that you know anything about, and prayer is tactics.

I like to joke about the failure mentality in our group. One thing a revolutionary, a spirit person, will not allow to exist in his or her being in a failure mentality. Sure, we fail. But a failure mentality is to anticipate failure, even to work out statistics that only 10 percent of our courses this quarter did not come off, and 15 percent the quarter before, and 28 percent. . . . That is the failure mentality.

I tell you, a spirit person is so damned shrewd. I've oftentimes mentioned Thomas Aquinas, who said, sure, the church must permit revolutions against the government. But he gave several criteria, and one was that before you start a revolution, you've got to be as certain as you can that you're going to win. He was a spirit man. He knew what it meant to be a revolutionary.

The revolutionary takes a jab, and if she sees that it's wrong, she withdraws. She pulls back before it has a chance to fail. The one who always makes the decisions six months before so that everybody can be ready and participate is not a revolutionary. You hold those decisions just as long as you possibly can before you pull out your weapon. It might even be that you won't have to shoot the man. You find another way to win.

Prayer is tactics. The person who doesn't have his or her tactics does not pray. This is why we said the other day that a revolutionary always dies in his tactics, never in his in goals or

objectives. She never dies in inclusive plans, but dies in her tactics. That's why when a prayer is verbalized, when it's a prayer, it's always a prayer relative to tactics and not to ends.

Radical Combat

Lastly, prayer is combat, radical combat. It is combat with God. It is life and death struggle with Being-in-Itself. This is not saying anything different from what we said at the beginning: prayer is happening, or prayer is freedom, or prayer is creativity. The prayer within a person's being is the place and the only place where that person intentionally touches raw being. No place else.

As Jacob wrestled with the Nameless One, he was alone and he was terrified. There was just one thing that the Nameless One was after and that was for Jacob to say out loud the way it was.

When you see that, there comes a scary complex of dynamics. When you take on Being, you always lose. Being has always won every contest. God has not lost one wrestling match. This is where the people of the Islamic world are extremely clear. They believe that a person is free, but that freedom is in the absolute sovereignty of God's will. God has never lost. Being has never lost. I suppose that there have been billions and billions of souls who have struggled with Being. As far as I know, every one of them, minus none, is rotting in the grave, and Being marches on. God always wins.

You've got to say that to yourself at least ten times: God always wins. If you don't see that, you don't see the stupidity and the overwhelming dread that consumes a person that dares to match up against Being. Who is stupid enough to shove his life against Being knowing that Being always wins?

The beginning of Psalm 2 is that God is in derision as he looks at the kings of the world. He's laughing. One of the horrors of it is that you know he lets you win sometimes. He lets you win sometimes. If you were playing some silly, asinine game, you wouldn't think anything of it. But if you were pushing your one life over against Being, and you win, the dread is not less than when you failed; it's multiplied by one thousand. You think, "What's that bastard up to, laughing at me when he lets me win, when I know very good and well that he never allowed anybody to win?"

And then comes the flip side of that. In the wisdom of China, if you save somebody's life, you have to take care of him the rest of your life; that's rooted in humanness. When God lets you win, whenever he lets you win, you've got a monkey on your back that you didn't really want. And we all knew this was coming: you're obligated to what you prayed for. He lets you win, and oh my God, you wish you hadn't prayed for what you got.

Oh, it's more complicated than that. You take the four phenomenological levels. The first is just the idea. Nobody who does not know what I just got through saying, no matter what poetry they use, never prayed. It's just the idea. And to put it in terms of what I've been talking about, it's just the idea that you pit yourself against Being and Being has never lost, never lost. Just that idea is the beginning of prayer.

Then it gets concretized. I always look upon this as sort of like sticking your big toe in the water. To put it in terms of combat, on this level you deliver a pull-punch, "Lord, those Biafrans over there, they've had the hell beat out of them, and everything. Bless them." It's concretized. That's sort of like the pull-punch from God. God plays with you very frequently. He lets you pull that punch, and just steps back. There are other times when he kicks the pants off you just for playing with him the least bit.

The next level we call personal. I never liked that. It's predictive prayer. This is where you just stand there. You don't ask this or that; you tell God the way it is. This is where you always

come with a four-point program. This is where the tactics come in, like, "Damn you, God! This is what we're going to do. Do you understand?" This is where, as Fred Gealy used to say, when you're a great teacher you always go into the class as God, knowing full well that you're not God. That is, you go in to run this universe, knowing good and well that God runs it. This is Lot, who wasn't as weak a man as we like to think. This is where you bargain with the Lord. Isn't it interesting how sometimes the Lord backs down? God backs down. Don't you wish you knew when God was going to back down?

Then comes the time, and I like to think of Moses here, on the final level. What a moment this is when you say, "God, you're going to have to kill me if it's not this way." Remember when Moses came down off the mountain and they were fooling around with the golden calf? I tell you, he told the Lord, he said, "You wipe me out, but don't you dare destroy these people." And the Lord ran.

Fred Gealy also is the one who says that the spiritual life is nothing but a dialogue, a dialogue with God. You say, "Over my dead body will Being continue the way it is." That's what you mean when you say that a revolutionary only dies in her tactics. God never slaughtered anybody who stood up to him, except in her tactics.

This means that every prayer always leaves Being different. Don't you tell the Lord this. In fact, we ought to whisper about it, for even when the Lord wins, I win. Being is never the same when I force Being to say "no." That's a little secret you never breathe.

Those of you who teach RS-I, remember what may be the greatest sentence you ever teach in the Niebuhr paper, where it says that Jesus forced a different response out of God when God beat the pants off him. That's why only a revolutionary can sing, "O death, where is thy victory? O grave, where is thy sting?" This is a smart aleck statement. Do you understand that? "Ho, ho, ho, death, where is thy victory? Ha, ha, ha, grave, where is thy sting?" But you don't tell the Lord about this. Or maybe this is what Abraham meant when he suggested, "God and I are friends." But he's God, mark you, and he never lost one contest.

So I sometimes think that the peace which passes all human understanding and the joy which is unspeakable and full of glory is this little secret, that in the midst of being beat to death there on the street, you can smile back into the face of Being. That's not a stoical attitude. That's an attitude of faith, for this secret was never known to the stoics, only to the people of faith.

Confession, Gratitude, Petition, and Intercession

One more little thing, and then I'll stop: confession, gratitude, petition, and intercession. You know, speaking dynamically, that we have it divided in half. The first two are more passive and the second two more active. Confession is more passive and gratitude is more active. Petition is more passive and intercession more active. One has to do with the dynamic of the *word* and the other has to do with the dynamic of the task or the mission. It's pretty clear that when you're giving an intercessory prayer, you're doing all of these. Petition is the key to what I'm talking about today.

I'd like to talk about all of them, but just a word here. Nobody ever made an intercessory prayer that was not on the other side of a petitionary prayer. Our strength comes out of weakness, always. The prayer to change Being only comes out of the awareness that only God wins. The other side of that, pushed to its radical edge, is my radical contingency, and that is my radical inadequacy.

A prayer, therefore, was never about anything except that which was impossible, and that is to change the structure of Being itself. When you pray for whatever you pray for, it's over against the impossible. The other side of that coin is the awareness of your own inadequacy.

This grounds us in the *word*. Only the one who is in Jesus Christ has ever prayed or ever will pray. That's why there's a body in history who has brought that to self-consciousness and who ends every prayer in his name - nothing reductionistic, nothing magic, nothing supernatural - just his name. In no other name has any prayer ever been offered or ever will be offered. That's why, and for no other reason, we look forward to that day which shall come just as surely - no, even more surely - than the sun will rise tomorrow. Before that name every knee shall bow and become human.

I would want to insist that save you and I have become people of prayer, in a way that I am quite willing to confess that I have not yet become, we are not ready to be consultants for the local church. Save we understand corporately that prayer is a spiritual task, and that the doing of it is bringing about spiritual reality, then we're going to do far more harm than good, and should never set forth.

Then I would call upon us - and I hate to put it this way, I'm afraid to put it this way - we've got to experiment in prayer. I'd like to see what would happen if Fifth City got prayed over. I'd like to see what would happen if this nation got prayed over. I'd like to see this summer be the time in which we create the means whereby this nitty-gritty, mechanical, thing-a-ma-jig, tactical model of the local church was bound together inseparably with spiritual reality. I don't like the way I put that. I'd like to see the movement blend the warp and woof of Spirit into one great tapestry this summer in preparation for our re-entry into the local congregation for the sake of the world.

This electronic excerpt is reprinted from 'Bending History: Selected Talks of Joseph Wesley Mathews', with permission granted by Resurgence Publishing Corporation, ISBN -10: **0976389207**, (c) 2004. The full publication is available for purchase at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Original paper document available at the Joseph Wesley Mathews Archives, Wesley Theological Seminary Library, Washington DC.