

Writer Anne Lamott suggests that prayer has three themes: Help, Thanks, and Wow! Many of us are familiar with the Help format in these words: “God, grant me Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and Wisdom to know the difference.” The “Serenity Prayer,” written by Niebuhr in about 1943, has become the mantra of many in Twelve Step programs.

Now, someone is thinking, “Is mantra the same as prayer?” Or maybe no one was wondering that; let’s talk about it anyway. Prayer, as far as the Church is concerned, is both a centering and a reaching out to a Power greater than ourselves. Chanting or reciting a mantra, at length, is a form of focusing the mind away from distractions. It becomes powerful through the dynamic of centering, going deep within—similar to meditation.

When I was a kid our family listened to the Saturday night Protestant service on our local radio station. Immediately after that half hour of inspiration & prayer, the Catholic program came on. It amazed me how long the “Hail Mary” chant went on: *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus; Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*” In more recent years I’ve attended in-home memorial gatherings on a death anniversary—the chanting seems to have a life of its own, and it challenges the patience of short-attention-span Protestants.

And all of this is of a piece with faith: these things recognize the organic, interconnectedness of life. Whether we pray in secret, as Jesus suggested in the interests of humility, or together in congregational settings, the action reminds us of who we are AND lifts us beyond that limitation or sense of isolation. Actually, as Peter L. Steinke points out in Healthy Congregations, “Wholeness involves various parts coming together and interacting.” (p.6)

We are all very familiar with what some of us call Our Common Prayer—“common” meaning shared widely. Our biggest pilikia in mixed gatherings, is the timeless confusion over sins, debts, and trespasses; this is where we pause, briefly, possibly uncomfortably, to hear what others are saying.

Ka Pule a ka Haku embodies the elements Lamott articulates: plea, appreciation, and wonder. Many psalms do the same. And most, after lamenting situations of abuse or calamity, end on a hopeful note, trusting in divine mercy and providence. Listen to these words from one of the lectionary passages for today, Psalm 138.

The Psalmist expresses humble appreciation in light of divine direction and protection as a higher power. The psalm, read singularly or in unison, joins heart, mind, and spirit—possibly body through a certain ritualistic posture—in an effort to transcend today’s bumps, bruises, and terminal diagnoses. This is done in confidence, trusting in God’s time and God’s agenda; it is not done out of a desire for a magical result. No “smoke & mirrors” here, just a persistent stirring...

It is just possible that we find our voice through prayer. I’ve met several persons who revealed to me either their inability to pray, or their sense they were not doing it well. Of course I didn’t say, “There is something wrong with you, then.” Rather, I encouraged them to consider prayer an honest expression from the heart. It is about opening ourselves. Eloquence is highly overrated. What one needs to do is find her/his voice, possibly with sighs too deep for words .

For some, especially those of us who were trained to keep quiet, to know our place—certainly in the church--our voices have been well-hidden. However, God gave us a voice and loves to hear it—in song, in prayer, in matters of justice, in sharing mana’o about the congregation’s challenges and gifts. Your voices matter to me as well; I trust that, in our time together, you will teach me about this congregation, yourselves, and how this faith journey is working out for you.

For you, not your cousin who is fascinated by a tv preacher who has a private jet and preaches the “prosperity gospel” and other heresies. For you, one who understands the simplicity and audacity of faith—a faith that suggests that to say “Jesus” is to say “justice,” because you take seriously the call to take a stand over against the smug and arrogant Powers.

On Friday evening and much of Saturday, Anela, Elle, Tama, and I joined with about 15 other folks at Keawala’i Church to hear Dr Allan Boesak speak about Costly Discipleship. This was the latest event in the Equipping Tomorrow’s Church Leaders series. While I could not persuade Tama & Elle to tell you about

it, their sentiment is that others ought to go next time; you never know what is to be learned. Anela and I would agree with that sentiment.

Boesak has studied the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his timeless witness for Christ over against Empire. It was Bonhoeffer who called Christians to choose costly grace rather than rely on “cheap” grace. With the former, one accepts the challenge to consider the oppressed, the vulnerable, the voiceless; with the latter, we operate in a default mode called “Jesus loves me, so there; nothing more is required; too bad for you.” While few are that callous, often that is the mode in which we live.

Consider this congregation. Where have you seen costly grace valued? What effect has that had on you, on the community? How has it touched you in your vulnerability and helped you find your voice?

For whom does the prophet cry out today in our society if not the marginalized, the expendable, the victims of violence and malnutrition? All of those whose condition is unthinkable to God, whose plight is a result of greed and privilege, of structural inequality and hubris. For whom does the prophet offer an alternative vision, one befitting the Peaceable Realm?

Are we those prophets? Are we those who have the courage to let God strengthen us for the task? Are we those who will go deep and far in prayer and thereby offer ourselves as the hands and feet and hearts of costly grace? If not us, who then?