

“NOT ME”

*a sermon delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno on July 24, 2022
based on Luke 11:1-13*

Let me address the odd title of this sermon straight away. I want to suggest “Not Me” as a form of address for God for you if you are shopping for one –

“Not Me” or “The Great Not Me.”

You know, America is struggling now with an epidemic of narcissism – there is an “Only Me” or “Me only” mood among many citizens. Exhibit A narcissists are in the news every day now and they are giving permission to anyone tempted to be selfish to, go ahead and put themselves first.

We’re all tempted to act selfishly, of course. So, to pray to the great NOT ME is a way of reminding ourselves we are not the only person on the planet. Yes, we are beloved by God, but we are not alone in this. Not by a long shot. Yes, and when the congress or Supreme Court make policies to satisfy the ideology of a small minority of Americans there are vast consequences for everyone that should not be ignored.

Anne Lamott who I quote more and more often these days because her honesty, her wit and her adorable charm are so welcome these days, suggested that name for God in a piece she wrote for the New York Times a couple of weeks ago. Her essay was called, *“I Don’t Want to See a High School Football Coach Praying at the 50-Yard Line.”* She was, of course, referring to a recent Supreme Court ruling that restored prayer in public schools.

Here is how she begins ...

Many of us who believe in a reality beyond the visible realms, who believe in a soul that survives death, and who are hoping for seats in heaven near the dessert table, also recoil from the image of a high school football coach praying at the 50-yard line.

It offends me to see sanctimonious public prayer in any circumstance — but a coach holding his players hostage while an audience watches his piety makes my skin crawl.

We are fighting furiously for women's rights and the planet, and we mean business. We believers march, rally and agitate, putting feet to our prayers. And in our private lives, we pray ...

She then gets specific about prayer ...

Prayer means talking to God, or to the great universal spirit ... or to Not Me. Prayer connects us umbilically to a spirit both outside and within us, who hears and answers. Is it like the comedian Flip Wilson saying, "I'm gonna pray now; anyone want anything?" Kind of.

I do not understand much about string theory, but I do know we are vibrations, all the time. Between the tiny strings is space in which change can happen. The strings are infinitesimal; the space between nearly limitless. Prayer says to that space, "I am tiny, helpless, needy, worried, but there's nothing I can do except send my love into that which is so much bigger than me."

How do people like me who believe entirely in science and reason also believe that prayer can heal and restore? Well, I've seen it happen a thousand times in my own inconsequential life. God seems like a total showoff to me, if perhaps unnecessarily cryptic.

When I pray for all the places where we see Christ crucified — Ukraine, India, the refugee camps — I see in my heart and in the newspaper that goodness draws near, through UNICEF, Doctors Without Borders, volunteers, through motley old us.

I wake up praying. I say a prayer some sober people told me to pray 36 years ago, because when all else fails, follow instructions. It helps me to not fixate on who I am, but on whose.

I am God's adorable, aging, self-centered, spaced-out beloved.

One man in early sobriety told me that he had come into recovery as a hotshot but that other sober men helped him work his way up to servant. I pray to be a good servant because I've learned that this is the path of happiness.

I pray for my family and all my sick friends that they have days of grace and healing, and I end my prayers, "Make me ever mindful of the needs of the poor."

Then I put on my glasses, let the dog out to pee and start my day. I will have horrible thoughts about others, typically the Christian right or the Supreme Court, or someone who has seriously crossed me, whose hair I pray falls out or whose book fails. I say to God, "Look — I think we can both see what we have on our hands here. Help me not be such a pill."

I so love the honesty of that. But let's just acknowledge that praying is both the most natural thing in the world and also damn hard work. I mean look, without thinking we find ourselves praying, "Oh my God!" or, "Oh my God, help me" at critical moments. We can't help it sometimes. But then when it comes to intentional prayer, that's a whole other matter.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a favorite preacher of mine confesses, *I am a failure at prayer. When people ask me about my prayer life, I feel like a bulimic must feel when people ask about her favorite dish. My mind starts scrambling for ways to hide my problem. I start talking about other things I do that I hope will make me sound like a godly person. I try to say admiring things about prayer so there can be no doubt about how important I think it is. I ask the other person to tell me about her prayer life, hoping she will not notice that I have changed the subject. [An Altar in the World, p. 176]*

What is it makes us uncomfortable about prayer, I wonder? Well, I imagine there are as many reasons as there are people who feel blocked. It may be a lack of belief in God, or a lack of belief that the creator of the Universe would hear one distinct voice or would even want to. With this in mind, I like best what Anne Lamott says are the best three prayers she knows: "Help, Thanks, Wow!"

Those three represent the most honest expressions of the human condition – out of our humble smallness we cry, "Help" because we're so often scared. Sometimes we cry, "Thanks!" because life is so full of wonderful gifts like, deep sleep, summer cherries, the light in the trees as the sun begins to go down. I mean, being human means wanting to **thank** somebody somewhere for those delicious things.

Finally there is the occasional need to say, "Wow." And there is any number of things that can knock us off our feet. The incredible courage of a number of

female Republican government officials who have made themselves so vulnerable and honest, coming forward and giving testimony to the January 6th Commission, has had me saying both “Wow,” and “Thanks” and “God Help those good people” in the past few days. They are taking tremendous abuse for it from their fellows.

Henri Nouwen in a lovely little book about the spiritual life called, *With Open Hands*, says that resistance to prayer is like the resistance of a tightly clenched fist.

He tells of a woman in a psychiatric facility who was swinging her fists at staff members until they restrained her. She stopped swinging but refused to open the fist she had weaponized. Finally someone pried it open and found there one small coin – she acted as if she were holding on to her very self, as if to give up that coin would have been to surrender her own soul.

Henri Nouwen says that prayer is so hard because it is like letting go. “We hang on to what is familiar, even if it is of no great value. [But] each time you let go and dare to surrender one of those many fears, your hand opens a little and your palms spread out in a gesture of receiving.”

Back in 2001 after 9-11, we were mightily afraid and in moments of honesty we caught ourselves praying out of deep anxiety a fear that the world would never feel normal again, ever.

Some of us prayed that prayer again when a year of quarantine had gone by and we didn't feel we'd gotten anywhere – would the world ever feel normal again? Many of us are fearful that the elections in November may take us backward to total authoritarian. It could happen.

Do we dare let go of the fear of what the world may become? Can we bring that to God?

Letting go.

Forty years ago I went to a Trappist monastery in Carleton for the first time. It's wine country now but in those days it was just rolling hills. The guest master, Fr. Timothy, greeted me and offered me an hour of counsel. I learned later that he had been a pilot in the Korean War.

Here was someone, driven to the monastery because he had been a participant in organized violence on a grand scale. Thirty years later he was still in recovery from that trauma.

Being a reader I asked Fr. Tim if he found lots of time to read in the monastery. He said he found that reading took too much time away from prayer. That remark humbled me. But I persisted. I asked him to tell me what he believed prayer was.

He took his right hand and motioned with it upward. As he did that he said, "Prayer is like a flower opening up to the sun." He did that over and over and over – until it sunk in.

Like Henri Nouwen he was acknowledging that prayer was like letting go. I have never found a better definition.

Letting go. I remember that Frederick Buechner once said that though a clenched fist may be strong, the one thing it cannot do is accept a helping hand.

Maybe prayer begins when we admit that we can use a helping hand. I love what the Nobel Prize winning Yiddish writer, Isaac Singer, once said about prayer. He said, "I only pray when I am in trouble, but I am in trouble all the time."

To pray may be to admit we are in trouble and that we are at the end of our own resources.

The way to begin to pray is probably just to begin. And the place to begin is to say, "God, I am lousy at this. I don't even know how to start, but I am tired of trying to do this all on my own. If you could maybe help me, I'd be so grateful."

There you are – maybe start right there.

Here's the first stanza of a poem by Benjamin Myers called, "Praying for dogs."

A tumor like a portabella on its neck,
a Pomeranian has poked its head

into my [Facebook] timeline where its owner posts *please pray*. And later at the Wednesday night prayer meeting Widow Jones requests a word of intercession for her Labradoodle who has a blockage in his doggy gut and is as bloated as a bullfrog's chin. And so at night I find myself in prayer like this: *Oh, Lord of endless mercy, Lord of grace and wonder please bring healing down to Cupcake and to Captain Fluffyface.*

Here is a bit more from Anne Lamott on prayer that I have found personally humbling because I can be so judgmental. Anne says,

It is miserable to be a hater. I pray to be more like Jesus with his crazy compassion and reckless love. Some days go better than others. I pray to remember that God loves Marjorie Taylor Greene exactly the same as God loves my grandson, because God loves, period. God does not have an app for Not Love. God sees beyond each person's awfulness to each person's needs. God loves them, as is. God is better at this than I am.

On good days, I feel (slightly) more neutral toward Ginni Thomas and the high school coach praying after games. I pray the great prayer of "Thanks" all day, for my glorious messy family, husband and life; for my faith, my sobriety; for nature; for all that is still here and still works after so much has been taken from us.

A walk is a great prayer. To make eye contact and smile is a kind of prayer, and it changes you. Fields and woods are the kingdom. You don't say, "Oh, there's a dark-eyed junco flitting around that same old pine tree; whatever," or: "Look at those purple wildflowers. I've seen those a dozen times." You are silent. There may be no one around you and the forest will speak to you in the way it will speak to an animal. And that changes you.

I have the theological understanding of a bright 8-year-old, but Jesus says we need to approach life like children, not like cranky know-it-alls, crazily busy, clutching our to-do lists. One of my daily prayers is, "Slow me down, Girlfriend." The prayer changes me. It breaks the toxic trance. God says to Moses the first time they meet, "Take off your shoes." Be on the earth. Breathe with me a moment.

Amen