



Thanks!

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Psalm 107
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How many of you were asked to pray over dinner on Thanksgiving Day? How many of you felt confident in that position? As you can imagine, I am a person to whom people often turn for prayer on occasions like this, and by I'm now pretty comfortable stepping up to the plate, but for many years I felt awkward about it. I felt like I wasn't a good enough pray-er, and I always hoped the gathered group would ask someone else. One reason I hoped someone else would be drafted is that I cannot always think fast on my feet, so I freeze a bit and worry about goofing up: I worry that I'll leave something out that's important, or that I'll get somebody's name wrong, or that I'll start going and won't be able to figure out how to end the prayer, or that the prayer will be so vapid that the shallowness of my spiritual life will be apparent to everybody. These sorts of fears made me shy about praying, and sometimes they still rise to the surface.

Perhaps it surprises you to learn that I've spent years trying to dodge the prayer at Thanksgiving dinner. I am, after all, a seminary graduate. But, to be honest, I skipped the course on prayer. That course was offered by a professor named Paul Hoon, who seemed nice enough, but I thought he was really old (he was, at that time, younger than I am now), and the course sounded like it was going to be boring. So I graduated with less expertise than I might have acquired, had I made different decisions. Instead, I learned how to pray like everybody else does – by doing it. Though I kind of regret missing the opportunity, I'm not sure that taking a course on prayer would actually have taught me what I need to know. After all, many of the people I know who are accomplished at prayer have never been to graduate school, and they can pray with the angels. How does one learn to pray with confidence? What does excellence in prayer look like?

For some reason, the other day while I was working on this sermon, I took the opportunity to read an article that I've been meaning to read for over 20 years. It's a study of Olympic swimmers and the processes through which young swimmers rise through the system to achieve that level of excellence.¹ I'm telling you about this because I think the author's conclusions are applicable beyond the worlds of high-achieving athletes, and may even help us to think about prayer and our spiritual lives.

The author, Daniel Chambliss, begins by debunking three prevailing assumptions about high achieving individuals.

First, he argues that people who achieve excellence are not necessarily nerdy social outcasts. Chambliss, I imagine, would disagree with the basic premise of a TV show like *The Big Bang Theory*. Excellence does not stem from being a loner.

¹ Daniel F. Chambliss, "The Mundanity of Excellence: An Ethnographic Report on Stratification and Olympic Swimmers," *Sociological Theory* 7:1 (Spring 1989), 70-86.

Second, he argues that people who achieve excellence are not necessarily those who have logged the most hours in the pursuit of their craft. Here Chambliss takes issues with theories like the one that Malcolm Gladwell later promoted in his book *Outliers*: the idea that people who achieve great things, like Bill Gates or Sidney Crosby, do so because they have put 10,000 hours or more into their work.² Excellence does not stem from more training time, says Chambliss.

Third, he argues that people who achieve excellence are not more talented than others. There is no special giftedness that accounts for excellence. Chambliss recognizes that this assertion flies in the face of some of our most cherished assumptions about human giftedness, but he is pretty insistent: People who achieve excellence are not more talented than many others.

What, then, does account for excellence in Chambliss' study? Mundane activities. Little things count, he says. He gives the example of Mary Meagher, an Olympic swimmer who learned how to execute perfect turns. Other swimmers learned how to execute perfect turns, too, but the difference was that these other swimmers only did this in competition. Mary Meagher did the perfect turns every time she got into the pool, so, by the time she got to a competition, she was just a shade quicker on the turns than were the other swimmers. A small change in technique and the discipline to put it into practice every day gave Meagher an edge that nobody else had, and with it she set a world record.

Excellence, says Chambliss, is a combination of dozens of little, mundane things. A slight change in technique here. A bit more discipline there. A slight modification in attitude. Excellence is the combination of dozens of mundane activities, synchronized into an effective whole.

If Chambliss is correct, and his article is pretty persuasive, then no one needs to be a religious virtuoso in order to offer a good prayer at Thanksgiving. No one needs to have extraordinary spiritual gifts in order to pray at any time, nor do we need to spend hours a day on our knees. Great prayer may be just like great athletic performances: a combination of dozens of mundane skills and activities that we somehow figure out how to synchronize. Everyday, ordinary people like you and me can be accomplished practitioners, and, of course, some of us already are.

Anne Lamott suggests that, at its heart, prayer can be boiled down to three mundane words: "Help, thanks, wow."³ My friend Joanne Lindstrom says we should add the word "oops" to this list of simple prayers, and she's got a good point. So, here's a basic prayer: "Oops. Help. Thanks. Wow." None of these words is fancy; they are all one syllable words that most of us learn as kids. But, they get the job done. Oops. Help. Thanks. Wow.

Despite their eloquent language and rich cadences, most psalms pretty much boil down to this prayer. Not all the psalms do this all at once. Some are more "oops" psalms; others are more "help" psalms. Psalm 107, before us this morning, is a "thanks" psalm, mostly. But its expressions of gratitude for finding one's way, for freedom, for healing, and for coming through a dangerous

² Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008).

³ Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).

situation safely are interwoven with steady reminders of how often “thanks” is connected to “oops, help, wow.” It’s often because someone helped us out of the oopses of our life that we say “Thanks!” It’s because we got help when we needed it that we are so grateful. “Wow,” we might say.

In addition to these four simple prayers, we often find despair in the psalms, usually in the “help” sections. The experience of God’s absence looms large, and this is one of the realities of faith that makes prayer a challenge. Sometimes it does not feel like there is anybody there.

Part of what makes championship swimming so mundane, notes Chambliss, is that there are so few high moments. Most of a swimmer’s time is spent in practice and in honing her craft, not in winning meets. Maintaining oneself through the mundanity, the repetitive drudgery of those thousands of laps, is one of the biggest psychological challenges for a swimmer. We could say the same thing about prayer: sometimes it seems like drudgery that does not have a big payoff. The rabbi Abraham Heschel writes about this in his book *God in Search of Man*, in which he includes a long quote from the 10th century mystic, Maimonides, about the rarity of spiritual insight.

Do not imagine that these great mysteries are completely and thoroughly known to any of us. By no means: sometimes truth flashes up before us with daylight brightness, but it is soon obscured. . . and we fall back into a darkness almost as black as that in which we were before. We are thus like a person whose surroundings are from time to time lit up by lightning, while in the intervals he is plunged into pitch-dark night. Some of us experience such flashes of illumination frequently. . . . Some see a single flash of light in the entire night of their lives. . . . with others there are short or long intermissions between the flashes of illumination, and lastly there are those who are not granted that their darkness be illuminated by a flash of lightning, but only, as it were, by the gleam of . . . the stories.⁴

I find this statement from Maimonides to be a bit of a downer, because he holds out no hope for a life full of illumination; but, on the plus side, this quote (which I keep by the side of my desk) reminds me that I’m not a hopeless case. An Olympic swimmer wins a big medal every couple of years, maybe only once in her life. Big-time spiritual insight comes infrequently as well, even for the most holy of men and women.

What we do when we pray or worship is that we make ourselves available. Heschel wrote elsewhere that prayer is a door of the heart left open, through which both God and the soul can enter.⁵ Prayer is rarely a big, dramatic affair. Chambliss reminds us that the road to excellence is a mundane one. We take baby steps, and we make small improvements or have significant insights along the way. Having good social support helps. Being reasonable and easy on ourselves helps, too. Chambliss reports that championship athletes manage to find ways to break

⁴ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Ch. Rabin, London, 1952, 43f., quoted in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1955), 139.

their progress down into small, achievable steps. Being able to take those small steps allows them to feel positive about their progress on a regular – even daily – basis.

So, if you want to grow in your prayer life, with confidence or expertise or maybe even by wowing the next Thanksgiving gathering, I suggest starting small. Learn to pray “oops.” Or, work on your “help” or “wow” prayers. Read the psalms, or the beautiful prayers embodied in our hymns, or great religious poetry. Read those prayers. Read them again. Say them out loud. Discover in them a new prayer technique. Develop a new discipline, even a small one. Have fun with prayer; God likes it when you have fun. And keep it simple. Oops. Help. Thanks. Wow.

Amen.