

The Merton Prayer

Psalm 23

July 27, 2025

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

This is the last sermon in our 4-week summer series about prayer, called “Prayer for People who have Trouble Praying.” Our hope was to encourage every one of you in your prayer practice. But we’ve especially wanted to encourage those of you who maybe have quietly given up on prayer. Praying can be a wonderful part of everyone’s life. We’ve been looking to some of the world’s great prayers for guidance and inspiration. I suspect the final prayer in the series may be, for some of you, a key that finally unlocks the door to prayer.

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

In my own life, the most paralyzing aspect of prayer is the anxiety I feel about the foolishness of prayer itself. What am I really doing when I pray? To whom am I talking?

- If, in fact, there is no God—which, even though we’re in a church, is a possibility any reasonable person has to acknowledge—there no one listening to my prayer; when I pray I’m just mumbling words to myself, a dupe in thrall to an ancient myth.
- If there is a God on the other end of my prayer, who is that God? Do I know God? Do I know who God is, do I know God’s character—do I really know anything about this remarkable Being to whom I’m cavalierly speaking?
- And maybe I *do* know something about God: maybe I know God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”; maybe I know about God’s deep longing to be in relationship with human beings, with me... even if I know all of that, do I know myself well enough to speak to God? Am I honest about who I am and who I’m not? If God knows me better than I know myself, is my prayer verbal narcissism, a delusional stream of self-serving desires?

Maybe you all don't get hung up like this. I could just be me (and I'm OK with that). But if you recognize any of the things I've named here in your own experience, you know what I mean about prayer being paralyzing. These philosophical, theological questions cut to the heart of prayer itself, which is, at its most basic level, a conversation between *a beautiful ineffable mystery known as "God,"* and *a human soul which is often just as mysterious to one's own Self.*

I sometimes wonder if there was a time in human history when prayer wasn't troubled by self-consciousness. But for those of us who live in this moment, critical self-consciousness is a definite obstacle to being able to pray.

Ever since the 1820s, when the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher warned us all that what we call "God" might *not* be a reality outside of us but might instead be a projection that comes from inside of us, everybody has had to be a bit more cautious about what we mean when we say "God." Then, Freud and the other great psychologists came along and revealed the role of the unconscious mind in everything we do; since Freud, none of us can blithely say that we know ourselves. My theology professor James Cone included Schleiermacher with Freud, Nietzsche and Karl Marx as modernity's "masters of suspicion." These thinkers all showed us that reality isn't always what it appears—we have to approach all belief with suspicion.

This intellectual crucible of modernity and the demands of these masters of suspicion made faith harder. Some people give up and leave religion behind. Others embrace a simpler and intellectually dishonest version of faith we call "fundamentalism." But the masters of suspicion, while they made faith harder, also left a gift: they helped give birth to a new kind of Christian thinking. This new kind of thinking honors the suspicions, it engages with them, and ultimately integrates them into Christian faith. This is the kind of Christianity we teach and practice here. It falls under the umbrella term, "liberal Christianity," and it's a Christianity that says "yes" it is still possible to think about God, to speak about God, and even to speak with God, in the midst of all this complexity. Today's prayer is a beautiful example of what this kind of faith sounds like.

A word about Thomas Merton for those who may not know him. Born in France around WW1, Merton's mother's died at age 6—a death that haunted him. An orphan by 15, Merton enrolled in college at Cambridge, in England; he was more interested in drinking and having sex than he was in his studies. To get a new start, his family moved him to America, where he enrolled at Columbia University in New York City. Still surrounded by temptations, Merton discovered, to his own astonishment, that he was drawn to a small, neighborhood Catholic Church in Manhattan. The rhythm of mass, the order, the sacred choreography somehow helped make better sense of the world for Merton—it lit a light inside him. He was baptized. He joined an austere order called the Trappists in a monastery in rural Kentucky. It was as far away from modern conveniences and sensory delights as one can get.

Merton embraced monastic life. But Merton's abbot saw his gift for writing and ordered him to write his spiritual autobiography. *The Seven Storey Mountain* became an unlikely bestseller in 1948. It showed not only could one be a religious person with intellectual integrity, but he showed that the disciplined religious life was not antiquated and backward—but the religious life could, in a strange way, be an antidote to the sicknesses of the modern world: meaninglessness, selfishness, violence, alienation from others and creation. Merton veered between the mystical and the political, suggesting, like Howard Thurman did, that there is no wall that separates the spiritual from the political. Merton was passionate about nonviolence, and a fierce critic of capitalism's destruction of human relationships and distortion of human desire.

This prayer poem that we read today is from Merton's 1956 book, *Thoughts in Solitude*. The backdrop of the prayer, which we learn at the end, is the 23rd Psalm, the Bible's great song about God's constant companionship on the road of life. But the prayer doesn't begin with that comforting affirmation; it begins with confession. Merton declares, "God, I have no idea where I'm going." (can I get an amen?) "I do not see the road ahead of me. I don't know where it will end." That part's easy for most of us to admit. But how about the next part? Merton says: "nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I'm following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so."

How beautiful and brutally refreshing is that? A monk, a Catholic priest, saying, "I have no idea if I'm getting this Christian thing right. I'm a tangled mess of complex and contradictory motives and impulses. I'm a riddle to my own self."

Confession—humility—is the basic posture of faith. One of the oldest Christian prayers, dating from the 400s, simply says, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." That's it. that's the prayer. Merton does exactly what our prayers can do. He doesn't launch into high-falutin' God language. He starts with a simple declaration: "I'm a flawed human being."

From that beginning of sincere confession, Merton makes an incredible turn. He says: "But *I believe the desire to please you does in fact please you.*" Wow! What Merton does here is re-locate the center of faith from belief to desire. As a culture we have this dumb and wrong idea that faith is about what you believe, that faith is thinking correctly about God. That's the church's error. It's not Jesus. The life of following Jesus is not so much about thinking correctly about God, it's about ordering what you desire—what you delight in! God has shown us what is good in this life—it's not cars or houses or electronics or even self-fulfillment. What is good is justice, kindness, it's knowing our neighbors and caring for them, it's peacemaking, and service, and it's enjoying the goodness of creation like peaches and fresh bread and chocolate. Faith is loving the things that God loves. Merton gets that.

Merton prays, "I believe the desire to please you does in fact please you." He's saying, "God, I'm really trying to figure out what you love and I'm trying to love those things!"

Merton returns again to humility. He prays, if I love what you love, “you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.” Merton imagines us as pilgrim travelers on the road of life, but Merton says that we may never know that the road we’re on is the “right” one. We may never get a “definitive” sign. This uncertainty is a feature, not a bug. It may even feel like “being lost and in the shadow of death.” God does not spare the faithful from doubt, and God certainly does not spare the faithful from suffering.

On the contrary, it is our experience of doubt and the experience of suffering in which God’s unceasing presence becomes known. Merton finally reveals that the 23rd Psalm has been in his mind the whole time. Even as he admits the intellectual complexity of faith in modernity, he marries his uncertainty to the timeless words of the Psalmist, weaving his doubt and faith together into a single, stronger cord.

All of you can do this same thing in your prayers. You can be free to name your own doubts, your uncertainties, your own weakness as you pray. Each one of you can weave your confession together with the affirmation that no matter who you are, no matter where you are on the road of life, no matter how deep you are in the vally of the shadow—God is with you, and always has been.

When you pray like this, this is what your prayer will sound like:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.