

Well, the worship and education group came up with the theme for today: Thanksgiving and Prayer, probably because Thanksgiving is around the corner, and Prayer is something we do all the time in church, and prayer *does* come with a lot of questions! Starting with the topic of prayer, one basic question that everyone asks is, Why pray if God already is said to know our thoughts and what is on our tongues even before we speak? Well, the matter is not that simple. Good questions have complex answers. One friend said to me, maybe God doesn't really know everything we are thinking... In a way that is true, since our thoughts are constantly changing and in process, forming every second! Or, even if God does know everything before we think or do it, one simple way to view prayer is that prayer is *communion or connection* with God, so praying is inviting God to help us form our thoughts *as we pray*, which then of course helps to guide our actions.

Another question about prayer is how do we view the *results*, because so often prayers seem unanswered. Whether it be about sickness, finding gainful employment, or about war, we often feel like God is not answering prayers. Some answers to this question are a bit simplistic, like "Well, our timing is not God's timing," or "God has a hidden plan that uses all this suffering." But the most satisfying response to me is the reality of human free will. Yes, many illnesses could easily be due to unhealthy air, water and food, which we have created. Gainful employment has very much to do with economic classes, and human free will can keep some people at lower salaries or even at slave wages. War is certainly a product of free will and stubborn hate. Though violence and war may be justified in an extreme need for defense and self-preservation, the main goal and purpose of God (in all religions!) is peace, goodness, steadfast love. I see a glimmer of hope in the push for humanitarian

corridors in Israel, ways to escape for all non-combatants.

“Peaceful co-existence” has to be the ultimate goal of God, in all major religions. And yes, the path to get there might involve killing or at least putting in prison people that are full of nothing but sociopathic terror and violence.

Prayers for peace... (we say they may never have worked very well on a worldwide scale) ... must start at a young age, and they do start in every individual heart. “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me” is such a wonderful and true song! Imagine if leaders of every group and nation had this song in their hearts! Israel and Palestinians would have been working on better ways to share land all along. We would have worked on better ways to share land with the Native Americans. Too many conflicts have been settled by force and by killing off the opposition.

We could spend forever talking about war, peace and prayer, but it’s time to move on to **Thanksgiving**. Thanksgiving is the principal mode of prayer. It is the first thing most people do in worship; I attended a bar and bat-mitzvah on Saturday, and it amazes me how many times in the service Jews pray prayers of Praise. Thanks and praise are almost the same... Praise God, praise the Creator, Be thankful, for all the good things that have their source in a good God. Many people make it a “discipline” to remember what we are thankful for, sometimes over the evening meal, sometimes at bedtime... so many things to be thankful for, even very little things, like food on the table, like a good night’s sleep, like someone opening a door for you, like someone smiling at you, like someone realizing you are having a hard time and sitting and talking for a while. In some “strong-spirit days” we can *start the day* with thanksgiving for a new day. We might even sing a song! There are so many good songs out there, about the morning!

I hope we all have some of the tunes and lyrics buzzing in our heads as we leave here today: “Oh what a beautiful morning, oh what a beautiful day, I’ve got a beautiful feeling....everything’s going my way! ”

Well, everything is not always “going our way,” so those lyrics from Oklahoma don’t tell the whole story, they don’t give a complete picture. We always have to take into account suffering and evil when we make big statements about God or life. But I hope we can say that in the balances, “Goodness” wins in our lives. Goodness is one of my favorite synonyms for God... and scriptures help underscore this kind of faith; Remember the beloved Psalm 23: “Surely *Goodness* and Mercy shall follow me all the days of my life!” Or from Romans 8: “God works for *Good*, in all things, for those who love God.” The Lord’s prayer emphasizes the positive in life: goodness over evil, continual and mutual forgiveness, thanks for daily bread! And Jesus’ life and death and resurrection all point to the reality that life is stronger than death, good is stronger than evil, and love can cast out fear and hate!

We come to church to celebrate the victory of love and peace over fear and war. We come to church to sing about these things (and we remember that some say “to sing is to pray twice!”) When we sing, the words sink deeper into our minds and hearts. “O what a beautiful morning!” “This is the day the Lord has made, we *will* rejoice and be glad in it.” “Each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings ... All creatures great and small The Lord God made them all!” Our final sing along, “My Favorite Things” (from Sound of Music) will remind us to remember good things, favorite things, even little things, everyday things, that give us reason to “rejoice and give thanks, and sing!” Amen? Amen.