

Help! Thanks! Wow!

Text: Psalm 40: 1; Luke 11: 1-4; 9-13

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G.K. Chesterton once said: “The number of new things we need to learn is small compared to the number of old things we need to be reminded of.”

That is so profoundly true, and I discover it over and again in my own life! Even simple things, easy things, long-practiced things can fall into my zone of forgetfulness. And then, unbidden, unexpected, out of nowhere, something will happen to remind me again, and I will say to myself, “Of course, I know that!”

Perhaps this is why I am so enthusiastic about a book on the popular market these days. Quite simply, it is a book about prayer and it reminds me of some of the most basic of things I seem prone to forget. It is disarming and accessible – which is how prayer should be. And, as I have put it to practice along my Lenten way, I have found pure blessing.

The book has an awesome title: Help! Thanks! Wow!¹ Anne Lamott is the author, a frequent contributor to contemporary conversations of the spiritual variety. She is spunky, insightful, a little bit irreverent and slightly off-center – all endearing qualities to me! Her understanding of prayer has emerged through hardships of all sorts: years of feeling lost, bumpy marriages, struggles with alcohol, single-parenting, and long walks with depression and anxiety. But, through it all, she has learned to speak to God with three clear words which she calls her three essential prayers.

But, before I tell you of Annie’s three prayers, let me expand the field. As you read through the Gospel accounts of Jesus and his practice of prayer - from Galilee to Gethsemane, Jericho to Jerusalem, Capernaum to Caesarea - it comes clear that his prayer life was nothing other than a natural conversation with a close friend. He consistently embodied that lesson. More, in his conversations with God, there was no need for gimmicks or abstractions or an impressive vocabulary. In fact, Jesus even said, “When you pray, don’t heap up empty phrases!” And then add to that the sheer power of how he prayed: take a step away, get personal, speak about what matters, trust that God hears, listen as much as you talk, and keep at it.

So, to be wondering about a simple outline by which to pray, we stand on solid Biblical ground! Jesus modeled, spoke, taught, and encouraged a practice of simplicity and meaningful connection. And it is in exactly that light that I share with you Ms. Lamott’s three essential prayers.

“Dear God, help!” Her first essential prayer is born in the reality that when it comes to many things in life, we are all novices and need assistance and help. None of us arrives on the planet as an expert! And, though admitting a certain modicum of helplessness is not a place where many of us are comfortable, at least not for very long, it is the best and most honest ground on which to begin.

So, ðhelp!ö Such a prayer can be motionless or still, silent or shouted, large bold font and underlined or teeny-tiny letters, one voice or in a chorus ó or all of these at once. But somehow, through the waiting heart of vulnerability, the posture of admitting our need and then inviting God in gets us started right.

ðThereø such freedom and relief in admitting youøve reached the place of great unknowing,ö she writes. Those in 12-step circles of the recovery community have come to articulate this as admitting to a certain powerlessness and the essential need for help from a Higher Power. Or, said differently by one of my heroes, Abraham Lincoln: ðI have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.ö

And so, the first essential prayer: ðDear God, help!ö I am quite sure that we can all fill in the reasons for ourselves: from the sand traps of our private concerns to the anguish of our violent culture made so real at Sandy Hook; from stuckness in Washington to whispers at home of loneliness, or illness, or discouragement, or grief. ðHelp!ö

But prayer always pushes us deeper and lifts our sights higher, and so the second essential prayer: **“Dear God, thanks!”**

Actually, Annie says that ðthanksö is the shorthand version. Itø squeezed down from her original translation of the second prayer which goes more like this: ðah í thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou . . . so much!ö Itø often accompanied with an audible exhalation of breath, a kind of kinesthetic expulsion of the bellows of the soul, as in ðTHANK YOU . . . WOOOOSH!ö

Thank you for helping me to find my way! Thank you for putting up with my circular chatter! Thank you for the wisdom to reach out to my friend! Thank you for accepting the fool I sometimes can be! Thank you for nudging me this way or that way! Thank you for the love in my life!

The power of gratitude is truly an amazing and miraculous force that sets an awesome process in motion. ðGratitude begins in our heartsö . . . and once it is expressed . . . ðdove-tails into behavior,ö she writes. Or, in other words, it begins in the whisper of personal expression and then opens us to new and more wholesome ways of living. It ushers in a new perspective, a new world-view.

My favorite story-teller, Garrison Keillor, goes so far as to say that ðspirituality and the spiritual life begin with gratitude.ö All else follows. And mystic Meister Eckhart said it even more simply: ðIf the only prayer you say in your whole life is -thank youøthat will suffice!ö

The third essential prayer: **“Dear God, wow!”** Itø only a single syllable but it tags and acknowledges the vast and immeasurable dimensions of lifeø grandeur. It flutters and utters and exudes and names the moments when it occurs to us again that the expanse of

this entire universe is inexpressively good and gracious and benevolent beyond our wildest knowing!

See it in a sunset! Or hold a baby! Or feel the warmth rise as you say I love you! Or discover the sweet spot between laughing and crying! Or find an Easter moment in the midst of a Good Friday world! Or discover the first crocus or pussy-willow of the springtime! Or accept the invitation of a fresh start! Or throw kindness into the world and watch it spread!

Those who study the origin of words tell us that *ōwowö* is actually a German conjunction of *ōI* *vow.ö* As if to say that our authentic *ōwowsö* to life's moments, grand or tiny, also illicit a kind of *ōvowö* that promises our full attention - as in show me such moments and *ōwowö* . . . or *ōI* *vowö* . . . to hold life in reverence from here on out¹ and to take it for granted no more!

Annie's words once more: *ō*Gorgeous, amazing things come into our lives when we are paying attention. Astonishing material and revelation appear all the time. So let it be. Take it in. Unto us so much is given. We just have to be open for business.*ö*

Back to the beginning: "The number of new things we need to learn is small compared to the number of old things we need to be reminded of."

May it be that during these weeks before Easter we will remind ourselves again of the simple power of prayer, a virtual mystery for our own practice! For as clear as we affirm that God is still speaking, this is also true: God is also still listening!

So help, thanks and wow! In the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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¹ References are from: Anne Lamott. Help! Thanks! Wow! The Three Essential Prayers. Riverhead Books, 2012.

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