

Not about Me

BY MEROLD WESTPHAL

Perhaps a burning preoccupation with oneself can coexist with prayers of thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession, even as it contaminates and domesticates them. But the prayer of praise is a deep decentering of the self.

Our neighbors were visiting a cathedral in Italy with their three-year-old son. He saw a woman kneeling in one of the pews and asked what she was doing, “She’s praying,” he was told. “She’s asking God for things.” A few minutes later his parents found him kneeling in one of the pews. In response to their query, he replied that he was asking God for – gelato!

There is something right about that prayer. After all, Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread, if not exactly gelato. But it is the prayer of a three-year-old, a beginner in the school of prayer who is not yet ready even for kindergarten.

I remember reading a list of the five elements of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition (for self), and intercession (for others). It triggered a shocking recognition: I do not know the first thing about prayer. I feel reasonably at home with the last four items on the list. I am comfortable asking for God’s help for myself and for others I care about; I am comfortable asking for forgiveness; and I am comfortable thanking God for the many gifts of divine mercy that have come my way. I am so much more fortunate than so many. But praise?

I have a friend who, when he says grace at mealtime, begins with praise: “Dear Lord, you are great. Your majesty fills the earth.” And so forth. I have to confess to feeling distinctly uncomfortable at such times. It is not that I think there is any insincerity in his prayer or have the least suspicion that he is praying “so that [he] may be seen by others” (Matthew 6:5). It is just that I

do not feel that I could pray that way. It would sound phony to me. So why the relative comfort with items two through five and the dis-ease with the first item, praise?

If we look closely, I think we can notice a difference between praise and the other phenomena under our gaze that will suggest an answer. We can distinguish praise from thanksgiving as follows: to give thanks is to praise God for the good things I have received from God, while to praise is to thank God for who God is, for what Luther calls God's "bare goodness," considered without reference to how I may benefit from it.¹ In the other modes of prayer I petition God for things *I* want or think *I* need, and I intercede for those for whom *I* care. I ask God to forgive *my* sins and to grant *me* the benefits of forgiveness; and I thank God for what God has given *me*. If in the context of corporate prayer, the I is replaced by the We, it is only the size of the self that has changed, not its preoccupation with itself, its interests, and its agenda. But with praise as disinterested delight in the bare goodness of God, I am preoccupied only with God.

Now we can form an hypothesis about why I had to confess that I did not know the first thing about prayer. I was beyond the gelato stage, but not very far beyond. Perhaps there was a burning preoccupation with myself that could coexist with thanksgiving, confession, petition, and even intercession, even as it contaminated and domesticated them. Perhaps I sensed how deep was the chasm to be crossed before words of disinterested delight in God could flow with even a modicum of integrity from my lips or heart. Which brings me to my thesis: prayer is a deep, quite possibly the deepest decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling or, if you like, deconstructing that burning preoccupation with myself.

That is why praise is fittingly first in the list of the elements of prayer. My focus, however, will not be on praise as I seek to explore the essence of prayer as a deep decentering of the self. My focus will rather be on a kenotic gesture that can be seen as prior even to praise and as the condition for the possibility not only of praise but of all five elements of prayer, insofar as they can be united in a complex whole in which each knows its proper place and plays its proper role.



I begin with the prayer of Samuel as we find it in 1 Samuel 3. The LORD called Samuel, who thought it was the priest, Eli, calling. Three times he runs to Eli, saying, "Here am I, for you called me." Finally, Eli realizes what is happening and tells Samuel next time to respond, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." We can combine the two responses to make up Samuel's prayer, for the first response is more appropriate when addressed to God, who was actually doing the calling, than to Eli. So here is our first prayer: "Here I am for you called me. Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."

Samuel does not originate the conversation but is called, called forth, even called into being by a voice not his own. The meaning of the situation in which he finds himself is not determined by his horizons of expectation, which are simultaneously surprised and shattered. Nor is it just his situation that is changed; his identity is changed, as he becomes no longer merely Hannah's son or Eli's helper, but the one who stands *coram deo*, in God's presence, by a call that is at once invitation and command. Everything begins with the "you called me." Prayer is the beginning of responsibility because it begins as response. Samuel identifies himself as the servant before his Lord. He calls himself *ehbed*, a bond-servant.

We can learn three things about prayer from Samuel. We learn how prayer is the task of a lifetime, so that even those who have been praying all their lives may not have gotten much farther than kindergarten. Samuel presents himself to God as a listener; and that is easier said than done. We know from merely human conversations how enormously difficult it is really to listen, to be fully present to our interlocutors. A fortiori, we only kid ourselves, like the tyro who reports that he learned to play golf yesterday, if we think we have finished learning how to listen to God as God deserves to be listened to.

Second, we learn why silence is such an important part of prayer. It is those who seem to know the most about prayer who emphasize this most strongly, and now we can see why. We cannot listen very well to the voice of God if we are chattering ourselves or even if we merely keep ourselves surrounded by noise, almost as a barrier to protect us from hearing the voice of any other. As Johannes Tauler puts it, "And therefore you should observe silence! In that manner the Word can be uttered and heard within. For surely, if you choose to speak, God must fall silent. There is no better way of serving the Word than by silence and by listening."² Prayer needs silence, not only external but also internal silence; for our minds and hearts can be and usually are very noisy places even when we emit no audible sound. God speaks in and as the silence.

Finally, we learn why Scripture and prayer are so integrally intertwined, why prayer can never be separated from some form of *lectio divina*. God speaks as silence, to be sure, but prayer cannot grow in a purely apophatic soil if for no other reason than that in such a context no God personal enough to get prayer started by speaking to us is to be found. If we are engaged in prayer rather than yogic meditation, it is the God who speaks in Scripture for whom we listen in the silence and to whom we listen as the silence. The very call to which we may respond "Here am I" can come as a mysterious voice in the night, but it typically comes through the words of Scripture, directly or indirectly in preaching, hymnody, liturgy, and so forth. Before prayer is a fivefold speech act on our part, it is listening to the word of God as found in Scripture.



Very closely related to Samuel's prayer is Mary's prayer at the annunciation. This is the prayer that precedes the canticle we know as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), and we can hear this earlier prayer as the prior condition of the possibility of that overflowing outburst of praise and thanksgiving. We might say that in the earlier prayer Mary assumes the posture from which her praise proceeds. The Magnificat is so heavily dependent on the song of Samuel's mother, Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), that we can only assume that Mary also knows the story of Samuel and of his prayer, which is echoed in her own. In response to the angel Gabriel's stunning and scary news about what is soon to happen, she replies, simply, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). She speaks these words immediately to Gabriel, but she understands him to be an angel, that is, a messenger from God. Ultimately she is responding to God; her words are a prayer.

In this prayer, we find Mary's theology and ethics in a nutshell. The theology revolves around the notion of God as one who speaks or, better, as the One who speaks; for God is not so much First Cause as First Speaker, the One whose word is always the beginning. Here "beginning" signifies not a Self-Explanatory Explainer in terms of which everything can be made transparent and intelligible but rather the fact that before I speak, or act, or even am, God has always already spoken.

In looking at Samuel's "Here am I," the focus was on its secondary nature, and the emphasis fell on the "for you called." Its repetition by Mary gives us the opportunity to look more closely at the act itself. It is an act of self-presentation to the God who is already present. There is no attempt, because there is no need to

find God. Having spoken, God is already present. Mary would easily understand Augustine's notion that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves (*interior intimo meo*)³ and his bittersweet confession, "late it was that I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late I loved you!

And, look, you were within me and I was outside.... You were with me, and I was not with you. Those outer beauties kept me far from you."⁴ And perhaps she knew enough of the captivating, intoxicating, even addicting power of those outer beauties, physical and social, to be able to understand Augustine's, "Nowhere do you depart from us, and hard it is for us to return to you."⁵ She understands that God is here, unusually so in the

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present instance, and the only question is whether I am willing and able to be here too. No doubt part of the problem is that while the messenger may be quite visible (we do not know the form of her visitation), God is not.

She also understands that to be present to God, she must turn away from the world in which she has been immersed. Not that there is something evil about the world, into which, in fact, God will send her back with a task. It is rather that apart from that turning, the world is defined by her agenda, however innocent, and not God's. As Thomas Merton puts it so beautifully: "detachment from things does not mean setting up a contradiction between 'things' and 'God' ... as if [God's] creatures were His rivals. We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached *from ourselves* in order to see and use all things in and for God."⁶

Mary's prayer is not without models. Perhaps when she says "let it be with me according to your word," she is thinking of the patience of Job, who, in the midst of unbearable suffering and loss, said, "Naked I came from my mothers' womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). His praise was not conditioned on God's word being in conformity with his desire and his agenda. The same can be said of David, of whom Mary might also have been thinking. When his son Absalom had rebelled against him and usurped the throne, David was forced to flee Jerusalem toward the wilderness. Loyal priests and Levites decided to bring the ark of the covenant of God with the royal party in flight. But David said, "Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it stays. But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you,' here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him" (2 Samuel 15:25-26). Job says, "I belong to you." David says, "I am at your disposal." And Mary says, "Let it be with me according to your word."

We are reminded in these stories that God allows bad things to happen to good people. In addition to words of promise and words of command, there are what we might call words of permission. For, as the story of Job makes especially clear, in biblical context the pain and suffering that comes our way may have its origin in the fallen freedom of created beings and need not be interpreted as divine judgment or punishment. Neither does it signify impotence or indifference; for without the permissive word of God, Satan would not have been able to torture Job, and the same understanding is implicit in the story of David and Absalom. Of course, Mary may not have had either of these stories in mind. But the condition for the possibility of her *Gelassenheit*, or letting go, is not some sort of Stoic resignation before blind fate but the faith she shares with Job and David that "in all things, as we know, [God] co-operates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose."⁷

While Mary may or may not have realized how her prayer echoed the prayers of Job and David, she surely could not have known how it would in turn be echoed in two prayers of her son. The first is the prayer he taught his disciples to pray. To get a feeling for its force, let us listen to the way it can all too easily be intended:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be my name,
my kingdom come,
my will be done on earth as yours is in heaven.

Even to the most cynical secularist, this is bound to sound like sacrilege. The crassness of this formulation is barely mitigated if we substitute *our* name, kingdom, and will for *mine*. We hear the decentering force of the prayer in its actual wording: *your* name, *your* kingdom, *your* will (Matthew 6:9-10). Here is a triple threat against all aspiration to autonomy, a triple abandonment of my preoccupation with myself. After, but only after I have made this move, I am in a position to pray rightly for material and spiritual blessings, daily bread, and forgiveness, for myself and for "us." And no sooner have I done so than the doxology, which is sometimes included in the prayer and sometimes serves as its liturgical trailer, reminds me of what I can so quickly forget: "for the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever." The Amen (so be it) that concludes this prayer, echoes the "let it be" of Mary's prayer, just as the "*your* name," "*your* kingdom," and "*your* will" echo her "*your* word." To feel the full force of the self-transformation called for by this self-transcendence is to understand how learning to pray is the task of a lifetime.

The second prayer, in which Mary's is echoed in that of her son, comes to us from Gethsemane. Anticipating the violent death that is about to strike, Jesus offers perhaps the most basic prayer of petition, which we might call the foxhole prayer: Lord, spare my life. "My

Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." But he prays this prayer from the posture that is its precondition in the sense that in a different posture it would be a different prayer altogether. The posture is that of belonging and disposability: "yet not what I want but what you want" (Matthew 26:39). Here Jesus remembers the "*your* name...*your* kingdom...*your* will" that he taught his disciples to pray; here he echoes his mother's "let it be

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with me according to your word," of which he may or may not have known anything; and here he enacts the kenosis celebrated in the early Christian hymn in praise of him who:

emptied himself
 taking the form of a slave . . .
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death
 – even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:7-8

Finally, with respect to Mary's prayer, we can note that as in Samuel's prayer, there is a human silence before the divine word. In Samuel's case, it is the silence of listening that awaits God's word. In Mary's case, it is the silence of meditation that comes after God's word. When the promised son is born, she received another message from God, this one doubly mediated by angels and shepherds, telling her that the boy is "a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:11). We read that "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). In the silence of this pondering, she once again places herself at the disposal of God's word and echoes in the stillness her earlier "let it be with me according to your word."



The third prayer for our consideration is the prayer of Elvis: "I want you, I need you, I love you with all my heart." I know that it was not a prayer as sung by Elvis. It is addressed to the latest hormonal heartthrob, and the reference to the heart seems to be a euphemism for another seat of desire. But let us imagine the possibility of these words addressed by the believing soul to God. They exhibit the fundamental trope of Hebrew poetry, parallelism, in which the same thing is said a second and even a third time in a slightly different way. In Elvis' version, "I love you" adds nothing new to "I want you" and "I need you." And therein lies the problem. Even when we convert the earthly eros into the heavenly by addressing these words to God, it is all about what I want, what I need, and what I, in those senses, love. The prospects for deepening our understanding of prayer as a deeply decentering posture do not seem very great.

If it is always darkest just before the dawn, we might find our way forward by seeing the problem in its starkest form. When I want to introduce my students to the difference between eros and agape, need love and gift love, where sexual desire is only a single instance of a more general structure, I say, "I love cheese omelet. Would you like me to love you too?" "I love cheese omelet" is a perfectly legitimate use of the word "love" in English. And its meaning here is clear. What I love is what I devour, what I assimilate to myself, what I make into a means to my ends. I give to it a

double career: in part it becomes what satisfies and strengthens me and in part it becomes what I flush away as worse than useless.

Now comes our first glimmer of hope. Even before we convert these words to a prayer, this alimentary attitude begins to unravel as I am deconstructed by my own desire. I want *you*, I need *you*, I love *you*. I can say these words in such a way as to make a sex *object* of the addressee. They can mean “I want you to belong to me so that *you are my thing*; I will dispose of you as I want.” This project can be astonishingly and frighteningly successful. All too often it is possible to dominate another, who, in such a setting, becomes codependent on my addiction to myself. But my own word, “*you*,” undermines and rebukes such a speech act. There is a performative contradiction in addressing someone as *you* in order to reduce her to some *it*. It is still about what I want, but, as Buber reminds us, the I that is linked to you is a different I from the one that is linked to it. I am still the one speaking, not the one spoken to, but a certain decentering has begun, whether I like it or even notice it. It cannot address me, but you can. To desire you is to desire vulnerability to alterity.

Now let us return to the supposition that the you to whom I address these words is God. I could hardly mean—or at least could hardly admit to myself that I mean—“I want you to belong to me so that *you are my thing*; I will dispose of you as I want.” That is as hopelessly crass as the “my name, my kingdom, my will” version of the Lord’s Prayer we considered earlier. But I might mean by “I love you” simply that I want and I need your help, your blessings, the benefits of having you on my side. Here, once again, decentering seems to get derailed by my preoccupation with myself.

But now suppose that what I mean is really “I want *you*,” you yourself, not your gifts:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

Psalm 42:1-2a

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you:
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Psalm 63:1

What has changed here is more fundamental than the replacement of a hunger metaphor with a thirst metaphor, and even more fundamental than the replacement of an “it” for a “you.” This is not just any old “you,” though what is true in this case may well be true in a measure in relation to human yous as well. But if we ask how it might be possible to “have” or to

“possess” God, to drink of the living water (John 4:7-14, 7:37-39), we will realize that the “you belong to me” path leads away from our goal, and only the “I belong to you – I am at your disposal” path leads to it. God cannot be “had” in any other way. God is always at our disposal, always giving Godself to those who are willing to take. But the only way to take this gift is to place ourselves at God’s disposal, to give not this or that but our very selves to God. The hymn writer gets it right when describing the love between Christ and the believer:

His forever, only His; Who the Lord and me shall part?
 Ah, with what a rest of bliss Christ can fill the loving heart!
 Heav’n and earth may fade and flee, Firstborn light in gloom decline;
 But while God and I shall be, I am His, and He is mine.⁸

Only *after* I am His can it be that He is mine. Kierkegaard calls this taking by giving, this possessing by dispossession, a paradox.

Just to the degree that we are enabled to experience such a miracle, a certain transubstantiation takes place, and water is changed into wine. What I mean is simply this: eros is not merely reconciled with agape; it becomes agape. Need love and gift love, desire and disposability, become two sides of the same coin. Or, if this metaphor still leaves them too distinct, we can speak of moving beyond the experiential space in which the difference between them makes any sense. Tauler expresses this nicely when he says that true prayer is a “loving ascent to God, in profound longing and humble surrender.”⁹ But perhaps we should not get too carried away, as if we occupy such a space very fully or for very long. The two-sides-of-one-coin metaphor reminds us that proximally and for the most part we experience them as distinct and all too easily fall back into such a space even after partial glimpses of their proper identity. Prayer is the task of a lifetime.



Prayer has many postures. People pray standing, sitting, kneeling, and prostrate. They pray with bowed head and folded hands. They pray with hands and face uplifted to heaven. They pray with eyes open and with eyes shut. Prayer engages the body in many different ways. But in speaking of prayer as the posture of the decentered self, I am speaking of a posture of the soul, of an inner attitude of the self that can appropriately express itself in a variety of outer stances. That is why I also described it as the fundamental project of the self. By reflecting on these three prayers, I hope to have indicated in a measure how this posture is possible only to a deeply decentered self.

This self is not its own origin. It does not make itself but rather receives itself in receiving what is given to it by putting itself at the disposal of the gift. What Henri Nouwen says about prayer can be said with equal validity

of becoming a self, which may be only the other side of the same coin: "So, the paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift."¹⁰ No doubt it is a privilege to be gifted; but there is a price. One must abandon the project of being the center in terms of which meaning, and truth, and goodness are defined. To dare to pray is to consider the price worth paying. To mature in prayer is to discover that the price itself is a gift.

But this is the task of a lifetime.¹¹

NOTES

1 See his commentary on Mary's "Magnificat," in *Luther's Works*, volume 21, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1956), 309-312.

2 Johannes Tauler, *Sermons*, translated by Maria Shradly (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 38.

3 Augustine, *Confessions*, III.6.

4 *Ibid.*, X.27; cf. VII.7, "For that light was within and I was out of doors."

5 *Ibid.*, VIII.3.

6 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 21 (emphasis in original).

7 Romans 8:28. The textual witnesses are not in agreement here. I cite the version followed by The Revised English Bible (emphasis added).

8 The hymn by George W. Robinson is sometimes known by its opening line, "Loved with Everlasting Love," and sometimes by its refrain, "I Am His, and He Is Mine."

9 Tauler, *Sermons*, 89.

10 Henri J. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 89.

11 This article is excerpted from my essay "Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self" in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds., *The Phenomenology of Prayer* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 13-31. It is reprinted by permission of Fordham University Press.



MEROLD WESTPHAL

is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University in Bronx, New York.