

Community Prayer Breakfast (Kuwanis) May, 2008
Conference Baptist Church

“Reconstructing Prayer in a Modern World”
By Rabbi Jamie Arnold

Good morning everyone.

I want to begin with a three-fold thank you. First, as an individual, I thank you for the invitation to address you on this important occasion. I am humbled, honored, and grateful. Second, on behalf of Congregation Beth Evergreen, your outreach to the Jewish community – evident in your inviting me to speak and in you moving the date of this gathering from Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath) to Monday, means a great deal to us, and is duly appreciated. Third, while I do not claim to speak on behalf of the entire Evergreen community, I believe that all of the residents of this beautiful mountain town owe the members of this Kuwanis Club chapter and our hosts here at Conference Baptist Church a debt of gratitude for sponsoring and organizing a truly communal commemoration of this national holiday, an opportunity to experiment in what it would mean for us, as Americans, to pray together. So, thank you, three times over.

So let's begin with a conversation about prayer. In a country that has welcomed to its shores so many varieties of faith, religious and non-religious practices, it can be a complicated subject. A debate begun in 1775 over a National Day of Prayer continues today in the media and internet, this month especially, as the 1st Thursday in May, since 1988, has been designated as the National Day of Prayer. The intent of such a day is clear – to encourage prayer in American life. But before we can address the question of how to do this, we must first speak to the question raised more and more among the youngest generation of Americans: Why pray?

I am hoping that, as a religious humanist, I may be able to offer a perspective about prayer that may be more accessible to those who are yet unconvinced that prayer can have value for us, not just as religious peoples, but as Americans. In brief, what I mean when I describe myself as a religious humanist is that I live Jewishly, I aspire to religious faith, in order to become more fully human. In other words, I see myself as human first, and Jewish second. I put prayer in this context as well.

So, I am going to speak briefly about various forms of prayer, and then look closely at five functions of prayer, functions that I believe are not driven or dependent upon a particular theology or perhaps any theology at all. I offer this in the hopes of encouraging prayer in America, encouraging prayerful practices that both unite us and honor the differences between the many great faith systems that have flourished in America since the notion of religious freedom was brought to this great land.

How does that sound?

Let's start with brief story. A young student came to his rebbe, his teacher/rabbi, as asked, *“What is the correct way to prayer?”* *The teacher listened patiently, and then*

replied. “ How can I answer this question knowing that some pray with words, others with silence, some with song, others with dance, some by fasting, others (perhaps some of you enjoying this breakfast pray) by feasting. For some prayer is done by remembering, other may try to forget, some choose solitude others, communal gatherings. There is no one right way to pray. You must find your way, and choose it with all your heart and soul.”

The scholars also talk about the forms or types of prayer, often as diads. There is communal prayer and individual prayer. There are prayers that are spontaneous and ones that are scripted or obligatory. Jewish life, for instance, typically places a stronger emphasis on communal and obligatory prayer, while other faiths may highlight personal, spontaneous prayer forms. It is clear to me that there is no one way to pray. Any of these ways, it seems to me are available to us. We just have to choose the ways that most suit us as a nation, and to choose those paths with our whole selves.

More can be said, it seems to me about the functions of prayer. Let me start this topic with a small Hebrew lesson. Jewish word for Prayer – *Tefillah*, is pronounced (and conjugated) in a grammatical form that implies reflexive, rather than transitive activity. In other words, prayer is something one does to one’s self. It is at least as much of an intrapersonal conversation as it is an interpersonal dialogue.

Now traditionally, the functions of Prayer are three: 1) petition, 2) thanksgiving, and 3) praise. We ask God for stuff, we thank God for stuff, and we praise God, halleluyah. For many, perhaps especially in the Jewish community, in the wake of the Holocaust, not to mention the modern Scientific Revolution, it can be challenging to place faith in an image of God that answers petitionary prayer, that desires or needs our gratitude and praise.

So let us try out a slightly reconstructed version of these three traditional functions of prayer. I will add two more to the pot. We’ll start by defining prayer as broadly as possible, as an intrapersonal dialogue: (not that we are praying to our self, but engaging the transcendent Self. The 5 functions of Prayer – are as follows:

- 1) Identify our Higher needs, deepest desires of our souls, get passed the whining of the ego.
- 2) Cultivate Gratitude in our lives, become more conscious of blessings in our lives
- 3) Learn to offer praise, be generous with praise, because praise is an expression of love, and love breeds more love and generosity and creativity

So that is my version of prayers of petition, thanks and praise. Two other functions of prayer seem particularly relevant for this occasion today.

Prayer can also

- 4) Foster communal engagement by providing a shared experience. In congregational life, prayer can stimulate a bond with neighbors and strangers.
- 5) Call on us to articulate and refine shared values, and from those values, a shared vision. What are the values we share in common, virtues and aspirations that transcend our individual lives and distinctive faith claims? The answers to this question will serve

as the foundation for communal and national cooperation and working partnerships for building a better world.

Today's gathering is an excellent example. The holiday, Memorial Day asserts the value of remembering and honoring the efforts of soldiers, men and women who sacrificed their lives to preserve our lives and American ways of life. Freedom is prominent among those values. The Hebrew Bible urges us to remember freedom and its costs and provides us with prayerful rituals to spark our memories, to stimulate our appreciation, to praise the sources of freedom. Memorial Day, deserves rites of remembrance as well, rites of prayer that tap each of these five functions of prayer: identifying our higher needs, voicing our gratitude, honoring our heroes with love expressed through words of praise, fostering communal engagement, and working together towards a shared vision.

Again, I thank you for this opportunity, and I close with a quote from an unlikely source on the subject of prayer.

“Strange is our situation here on earth. Each of us comes for a short visit not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that we are here for the sake of each other, above all, for those upon whose smile and wellbeing our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of others, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received and am still receiving.”

Albert Einstein.

Scientist or saint; Jew, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh; secularist or mystic; may we all, inspired by this day and our gathering, join together in the holy work of furthering the legacies of those whose memory we honor today.