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As Natural as Breathing

By The Rev. Rachel Rickenbaker

Recently, my friend asked me for prayers, saying to me, “I’m grateful for your prayers because I don’t know how to pray.”

This is nothing unusual. I have encountered many people over the years who have said they don’t know how to pray, or they need prayers from someone else, who is “closer to God” than they are.

When it comes to prayer, we often make it so much more complicated than it needs to be. Depending on the faith or denomination we’ve been raised in, we might think that our words are inadequate compared to the great prayers we’ve heard prayed over the years.

We can also get caught up in our own sense of unworthiness and get stuck, thinking there’s no way God hears us – mere human beings as we are – living lives of brokenness and imperfection.

It does not help that some in society have spread the idea that thoughts and prayers are empty words, meaningless platitudes without action. It is no wonder so many people feel inadequate in their prayer lives.

Today, I want you to know, believe, and trust this: prayer is as natural as breathing. It is a part of who we are, a way for us to express and stay connected to God, to be connected to the world and those around us. Prayers do not need to have words. Sometimes, there are truly no words to say when we are caught up in grief, anxiety, fear, or are overwhelmed.

One comforting passage of Scripture reminds us that

“. . . the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

When we don't know what we ought to say, we can take several deep breaths knowing that the Holy Spirit is interceding for us and all of creation.

But often, prayer will contain words. Yet, those words do not need to be complicated. As I told my friend who didn't know how to pray, I pray as if I'm speaking to a friend – whether I'm in the car, cleaning the house, in the middle of making dinner, or even getting ready in the morning.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he gave them the Lord's Prayer. For most of us, the Lord's Prayer has become automatic. It is one of the most common prayers prayed in hospitals, like Psalm 23, because people know it in their souls. Individuals remember it. Christians pray it nearly every time we gather for worship. The reason we remember it is because it's simple. It contains words that are relatable.

At the beginning of the Lord's Prayer, the language of “Our Father,” is more like, “Daddy.” It is relational language, not of a God who is far off and distant, removed from us, but rather, one who desires to hold us close and who delights in us. This is the language prayed by God himself, who took on human flesh, and came to live and die as one of us and rise again.

The petitions of the Lord's Prayer are memorable and related to our lives -- things that we need and desire: God's Kingdom to come, God's will to be done, daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil.

Prayer is not meant to be complicated. We can certainly turn to many beautiful written prayers in Scripture, in the Book of Common Prayer (pps. 813-835 and 458-465), and in many devotional books.

For day-to-day communication with the one who created you, who loves you, and who redeems you, prayer can flow as easily as a conversation with a good friend or loved one.

The beautiful thing is, we can be vulnerable and broken and completely and utterly honest before God. Because He knows us so deeply and intimately already, there is no need to be embarrassed or feel ashamed of our words or lack of words.

Prayer is indeed a meaningful action. And prayer spurs us into action. When we pray to God, when we are praying for those in need in the world around us, and even when we pray for our enemies, we are opening ourselves up to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. That will certainly lead us to action.

So yes, you may not believe you are perfect in prayer. I'm certainly not! But perfection in prayer is not necessary. Prayer is as natural as breathing, and breathing is something we do every day, at all times.