

Later, in the middle of that same night she suddenly awoke with Jesus literally in the room. He spoke with her and his appearance and instruction to her resulted in total healing. As she told the story more than 35 years later in her book she said the incident “remains to this day the most real and vivid experience of my life.”

There we have the essence of the prayer of relinquishment. Agreeing to stop asking even for what we might assume is God’s best will. Agreeing to accept our circumstances and not continue to pray for change. Agreeing to relinquish our own will in the matter and trust God for a bigger plan and purpose than we can see now. Stop asking. Accept. Surrender! It can be a bitter pill is to swallow, because you have to really mean it.

The first time I prayed the prayer of relinquishment I did so it under circumstances nowhere near as unfortunate as Catherine’s. I was at a place in my first church where I felt absolutely spent. The senior pastor and I didn’t see eye to eye, the congregation was in disorder, and I was being urged by people who cared for me to get out of that position. But as desperate as I was for change there seemed little possibility of it; month after month rolled along and there was no resolution and no new job offered. I spared no effort loudly complaining, murmuring and begging my prayer partners to beseech God to change things for me. They faithfully prayed for me every which way and we saw no results.

One day I got a call from one of my prayer warriors, a woman I relied on, who told me that while she was praying for me the Lord had reminded her of a time in her own life when he had been a single mother with four young children, in a low paying job, no food in the cupboard and on the verge of losing her home. She said she felt it was the “end of the end.” She finally surrendered everything to God, praying “I can’t do this anymore. Show me what’s next.” With no hope that anything would ever change, she prayed a prayer of relinquishment and a whole new direction opened up miraculously. She said to me, “I think God wants you to do the same thing. Accept where you are and trust God.”

Well, I wasn’t encouraged, but I didn’t want her to know it. I thanked her and then said, “Well, actually I’ve really already done that. But I’ll think this over and pray about it.” After our conversation, I suddenly thought, “WHEN did you already do that?” I couldn’t pinpoint a time when I had relinquished my own plan at all. With a heavy heart I put my head down on my desk and spoke out loud the words of surrender.

Now it was in God’s hands to do something or do nothing — whatever God thought best for me. No more selfish prayers. No more complaining. After a few days a sense of peace (or maybe contentment) settled in. Nothing changed at work, but I had changed. At least the desperation finally lifted.

Exactly three weeks later a huge “something” happened after all. I saw a new job posting on the denominational website, for a church in Minnesota looking for a pastor. I took the posting home, showed Karen, and she said something like, “That’s the one! It’s the answer to your prayer.” And the rest, as they say, is history! Had my prayer of relinquishment removed the obstacles barring my access to God’s will for my life? It sure seemed so.

The word “relinquishment” isn’t found in the Bible, but I think the concept is definitely there. Wasn’t it a prayer of relinquishment in Job’s heart when he said, “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15)? And didn’t Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego express a prayer of relinquishment when said, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it...But even if he does not...we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Daniel 3:17-18)? And didn’t Jesus offer a prayer of relinquishment when he said, “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42)?

It may be that a prayer of relinquishment comes most naturally for us in moments of desperation, after everything else fails, when life is at its lowest points; but I wonder what would happen if we learned to pray that prayer sooner? How would it change things if we actively sought to be part of God’s will and plan today?

What would it be like to pray the prayer of relinquishment for our church right now? Overall things are going pretty well for us: in a little while we’ll see a balanced budget, elect new officers, and celebrate another year of fruitful ministries. Maybe now is the perfect time to pray that we can be part of God’s will and plan for us and for our community!

I think we rarely use the prayer of relinquishment because we don’t like to admit we’re not in control of things. The fact that we have to surrender everything to God frightens us. We can’t just pretend to relinquish our own will as a ploy to get God to act. God knows what is in our hearts. I think the prayer of relinquishment is difficult for us because there are some things we hold so dear that we can never truly lay them down at God’s feet and walk away.

It's a difficult prayer because surrendering our will means we'll have to do things God's way, whether we like it or not.

Writer and spiritual director Richard J. Foster calls this “crucifying our will.” We must lay down our human will and be ready to accept the divine will of God laid out before us in Jesus Christ. Through his life and ministry, through his death and resurrection, Jesus laid out for us the way, the truth, and the life that leads to God's Kingdom.

Crucifying our will is tough work; and it takes practice. But the struggle is important because the prayer of relinquishment is Christian prayer and not fatalism. We do not resign ourselves to fate: we seek to join God's plan for salvation already in progress. We choose to become “co-laborers” with God in the work of the Kingdom. The prayer of relinquishment is a *bona fide* letting go, but it is release with hope. We are buoyed up by a confident trust in the character of God. We know that God is good and is out to do us good always. That gives hope to believe that we are the winners, regardless of what we are being called upon to relinquish. God is inviting us deeper in and higher up. Relinquishment brings transforming power, new joy, and deeper intimacy.

Join me in a prayer of relinquishment for our congregation:

Dear God, we come before you today with the intent step into the grand design you are already working in and through us and this community. We're human, so we struggle to let go, to put your will before our own, to make another's needs our priority: but we seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ, to follow him and live by his example, and to do your work in the world. We cannot know what the future holds, but with you in command, we have nothing to fear. We trust you to lead us forward and prosper us in your Kingdom-work. Use us as kingdom-builders, gospel-speakers, Spirit-healers, and love-bearers of your new creation. We thank you and praise you for choosing us a co-creators of your kingdom; make us worthy of the trust you have placed in us. All this we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sources:

- Guideposts, “The Prayer of Relinquishment,” Catherine Marshall. January 2015.
- Richard J. Foster. “Crucifying Our Will: Praying Through the Struggle to Let Go.” *Knowing & Doing*, Fall 2005.

The Prayer of Relinquishment

Annual Meeting Sunday, January 25, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 26:36-44

The philosopher Socrates is quoted as saying, “Our prayers should be for blessings in general, for God knows best what is good for us.” And I agree. But, I must also admit that I have a bad habit of telling God how I want things to turn out. I'm quick to tell God what I need and what I want in my prayers: I ask God for healing for one person or peace for another person because that's how I think it should be.

Now, some might call this arrogance, which it is; to presume to tell God what to do is the height of conceit. Or you could say that I have “control issues,” which is also true; it's hard to let go and let God. Or we might call it Obsessive Compulsive Prayer Disorder as I pray to fit God's will and plan into mine. My prayer life isn't perfect, but I'm working on it.

But recently I learned a new form of prayer which just might revolutionize my prayer life: the prayer of relinquishment. In brief, a prayer of relinquishment surrenders the current circumstances to God, just as they are, and asks to be part of God's plan for the future.

My first introduction to this prayer came through the words of the late Catherine Marshall. Catherine was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1943. After two years of monthly chest x-rays showing no improvement whatsoever, and despite every conceivable kind of prayer and all the faith she could muster, Catherine “plummeted into real despair,” as she puts it. What more could she possibly do? She tells us what happened next.

“Only one way was left. Perhaps I had held back one heart's desire. So after many days of struggling, I handed over to God every last vestige of self-will, even my intense desire for complete health. Finally I was able to pray, ‘Lord, I understand no part of this, but if You want me to be an invalid for the rest of my life — well, it's up to You. I place myself in your hands, for better or for worse. I ask only to serve You.’”