



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lydia Talbot: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re so happy to have you with us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our guest today is writer and theologian, Father Ronald Rolheiser, who will talk with us about prayer.

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back writer Tom McGrath, with the story of a lesson he learned from his grandmother about the power of prayer.

Lillian Daniel: And we begin with the story of a Chicago woman whose life is deeply centered in prayer. Ronne Hartfield is a writer, poet and arts educator, and this is her spiritual journey.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Ronne Hartfield: Prayer is a very sensual act and I get down on my knees when I pray. There’s that permanent relationship to the Earth. And I think a permanent relationship to the body, to the ears, to the eyes, to the mouth, to the skin. Although my parents didn’t go to church, they had, what I would later term, a strong sense of the sacred and a deep interest in the Bible. They knew a lot of the Bible by heart. I began to visit churches with various high school friends. By happenstance I went to an Episcopal church and I felt so at home immediately. When I went to the University of Chicago, I was sixteen years old and I got a visit my first week in the dormitory from the Episcopal chaplain. We became very close friends. I started going to Bond Chapel. I think that being in the chapel was centering for me.

When my oldest child was three years old, I had twins. I was so overwhelmed with the sheer duties of mothering those two babies and a three-year-old that the only way I got through it was through prayer. I would sing the Psalms and the best one for me was the Magnificat because it begins with, “Behold the handmaiden of the Lord...” That sense of lowliness and service and being blessed was powerful for me. Prayer to me, the most simplistic idea of it, is that you ask for something and you may or may not get it. Later I expanded that sense of asking to talking to. Asking not so much for a thing, as for the right uses of things that come to me. I pray for strength and for wisdom. And I pray to all my ancestors because I come out of those traditions that are African and that are Native American. For me, faith, religion, God, the Sacred, are all in the world, not separated from the world. I pray everyday for some kind of message that I can hear or internalize that will strengthen me to do what it is I have to do.

INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: Ronne Hartfield's work in arts education with the School of the Art Institute and Urban Gateways has influenced the lives of thousands of young people in Chicago. Our thanks to her for sharing her story.

And now, let me tell you about today's speaker. Ron Rolheiser is a priest, theologian, and writer whose books are popular throughout the world for their ability to connect theological ideas to common experience. He writes a weekly column carried by Catholic newspapers worldwide and is one of the church's most sought after leaders for workshops and retreats. In 2005, he began a five-year assignment as President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio. We're delighted to welcome Fr. Ron Rolheiser to "30 Good Minutes." Welcome, Ron.

MESSAGE

Ron Rolheiser: Thank you, Lydia.

Prayer. What is prayer? I want to begin with, for me, my favorite definition and it's one of the oldest definitions and classical definitions of prayer. If you went to an old encyclopedia or some old, dusty textbook in a library and looked up "What is prayer?" one of the definitions you'd find would be this. It simply says: Prayer is lifting mind and heart to God. Prayer, lifting mind and heart to God.

It sounds very simple but, in fact, we rarely do it. And the reason we don't is not because we don't want to lift our heart and mind to God—that's the natural impulse inside of us—but because we have an idea that prayer somehow needs to be something sacred, something holy. Often times the feelings we have in our minds and hearts are not sacred or holy to us at all. We feel anger, bitterness, sexual tension, boredom, resentments, and somehow we feel we can't pray out of this. So what happens is we go wherever we pray—to our chapels, our churches, our synagogues—and instead of trying to lift what's really inside of ourselves, we tend to try to lift what we think God wants to see inside of us.

We don't pray our boredom. We don't pray our anger. We don't pray our vengeful feelings. We don't pray our sexual tension. We try to lift something else to God and consequently our prayer really isn't coming from inside of us. We're not lifting mind and heart to God. But if we understand this definition, prayer is lifting mind and heart to God, then any feeling, any thought is an apt opening and entry into prayer. So when we go to pray, if we're bored we pray boredom, if we're angry we pray anger, if we're full of sexual tension we pray sexual tension, and if we're full of praise and joy we pray that. Then we give our praise to God in terms of joy and praise. You see for instance in the classical Psalms that Jewish communities and Christian communities have prayed. The Psalms are a keyboard with every kind of song in it. So the Psalms are full of praise. They are also full of murderous feelings. They are full of every kind of emotion, the entire spectrum of the rainbow.

I want to give you two little stories that, at least for me, help illustrate that. The first one is a Jewish parable which I very much like. They say there was a farmer who was in his field on a Friday afternoon and he forgot to watch his time closely and the sun sank so he couldn't travel

home to celebrate the Seder and the Sabbath with his family. He was forced to spend the entire day in his field until sundown the next night. So Saturday night when he goes home, he's met by his wife who is quite irate, as well as by a quite irate rabbi who scolds him for being so careless. But then the rabbi said to the farmer, "Now, did you at least pray out in the field? You spent the day missing Sabbath. Did you at least pray?" The farmer said, "Well, rabbi, I'm not that bright a man and all the prayers I knew I was able to say in about five minutes. So what I did, I spent the rest of the day just reciting the alphabet, thinking to my self that God is intelligent, he can make words out of all those letters." In some sense it's a beautiful definition of prayer. The alphabet of our lives—the anger, the bitterness, the praise, the joys—we lift them up and we let God make the words of our lives.

Even a simpler story. One of my older sisters tells the story about one of my young nephews when he was about six years old and he had just started Catholic school. He came home from school one night and she was putting him to bed. She always made him say his prayers before bed. That night he refused to say his prayers. And so she said to him, "What's the matter? Don't you pray any more?" He said, "No, I don't pray because in school they taught us that prayer is talking to God and tonight I'm tired and I have nothing to say!" You see, he got it. He got it! Prayer is really lifting what's there. He was tired and he was lifting his tiredness to God.

If prayer is lifting heart and mind to God, I want to spend a few minutes now just looking at some of the rules for this. The first rule is quite simply this: if prayer is lifting mind and heart to God, the first rule is there's no wrong way to pray. There isn't any wrong way to say prayers. A friend of mine who works in religious education, he gets this made into a t-shirt and he gives it to all the students and so on. You see these young people walking around in retreats and the t-shirt simply says: "There is no wrong way to pray." Any feeling, anything we express is right. It's lifting our mind and our heart to God.

The second rule. The Saints and classical literature on prayer in all the denominations and religions will always tell you this. The second rule for prayer has nothing to do with the how, the methodology, whether you pray centering prayer or meditation or contemplation, or Protestant, Catholic or Jewish prayers. The central rule for prayer is simply: show up! Simply to show up.

I want to give you a little analogy on this. Imagine you had a mother who is retired, living in a senior citizens home. You, the dutiful child, visit her everyday, day after day, for one hour. So you're visiting her five or six times a week and over the course of a year you're visiting her maybe three hundred to three hundred twenty times. You spend an hour with her. During that time, how many times do you think you have an interesting conversation with your mother? Probably not that often. Maybe three times in a year? The other times you're talking about Jell-o, the kids coming home, the weather, is Jack back and is he over his cold. You're looking at your watch a couple of times. That's wonderful. Because the deep things in prayer are not the conversation. The deep thing that would happen with you and your mother is what's happening underneath. If you sit down with your mother for three hundred hours, something is growing underneath. The words are not so important. It's exactly the same way with God. The key thing is just go there. If we're bored, sit there. If you need to look at your watch, do it.

Therese of Lisieux, the wonderful young Catholic mystic who died in 1879, when asked is it

wrong to fall asleep during prayer said, “Not at all!” She had this beautiful little quip. She said, “A child is equally pleasing to her parents when the little baby is asleep or awake. Sometimes even more pleasing asleep!” The same with our prayer. The key thing with our prayer is just to go there. Don’t be afraid to be bored. Don’t be afraid that the feelings you have inside of you don’t seem very holy, they don’t feel very pious or they don’t seem very sacred. Prayer isn’t about lifting up only our sacredness to God. It’s about lifting everything inside of us up to God, including all of our anger. You see this so clearly in the Psalms. We have Psalms about bashing people’s kids heads against the stone. That’s also prayer.

Finally, one last thing about prayer: don’t be afraid to experience a strong resistance inside of yourself. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, the wonderful Jewish writer, talks about how an important part of prayer—strongly seen in the Jewish scriptures, strongly seen in the Christian scriptures—is simply the wrestling with God, struggling with God, putting up resistance. Rabbi Heschel says, “Ever since Abraham argued with God and wouldn’t let him destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, deeply spiritual people haven’t always easily said to God, ‘Thy will be done.’” Beginning with Abraham, and going up through Jesus, you have strong examples of people saying to God, “Thy will be changed.” Don’t be afraid to wrestle with God. Don’t be afraid to struggle with God. You’ll end up losing, but you will *win* by losing.

So I leave you with this: prayer is lifting mind and heart to God. My great challenge is don’t be afraid to do that. Don’t be afraid to actually lift what is inside of you, rather than what you think should be inside of you. Amen.

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you’d like a free printed transcript or audio copy of the message you just heard from Father Ronald Rolheiser, stay with us and we’ll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or download the text anytime.

Now, let’s talk with Father Rolheiser. Ron, I loved your story about the man reciting the alphabet to God as prayer. It reminded me of a time when I was sitting in church and there was a young seminarian leading the pastoral prayers. He had to list the different names. He came across a name that he just couldn’t pronounce and he kept stumbling over it in the prayer and it was very painful. You could feel the tension in the congregation rise. Finally he said, “Oh God, you know what the woman’s name is!” Everybody just sort of laughed and we all realized, of course, God knew that! That story was so wonderful, but I was stimulated by the idea that we take to God our boredom or our anger or our sexual tension in prayer. I wondered, how does a prayer like that sound? What do you say in such a prayer?

Ron Rolheiser: First of all, I’m glad you asked that question because it’s difficult to answer. Not because there isn’t an answer, but precisely because prayer is something so deeply private, deeply intimate. It’s like love talk. It’s not the type of thing where I can give you a quick formulation of, “Lillian, it sounds something like this.” It’s deep honesty that really comes from the heart, precisely about boredom, anger, sexual tension. That’s very intimate talk. I remember Etty Hillesum, the wonderful writer. She said, “Prayer is the most intimate of all talk.” So in that sense it’s a wonderful question you’re asking, but how do you ask someone the question, how do

you talk to your lover? Or how do a man and his wife at night have a deep intimate conversation? It's getting back to the heart and it's honesty and it's letting the words form.

Lillian Daniel: So when you say to pray out of boredom, you mean admit that you're bored to God, for example?

Ron Rolheiser: Right. And especially don't deny it. I remember a great line from Robert Bly, the poet. He said he was in church one day and his young son was sitting between him and his mother-in-law. He said the kid was nine-years-old and squirming around. Finally, he said, "I'm so bored!" The mother-in-law said, "Michael, you're *not* bored!" Not a good lie! You see, when we're bored, we're bored, and the last person we need to pretend to is God. So on any given day you can go to church and pray, "I'm so tired and bored!" Ah, that's prayer. That is prayer!

Lydia Talbot: The Scriptures remind us in Thessalonians, "to pray without ceasing." What does that mean to you?

Ron Rolheiser: Ah, a very good line. To pray without ceasing doesn't necessarily mean that we say prayers without ceasing. I think there is a very important distinction between praying formally and actually saying prayers and praying. I would connect that line in Thessalonians to a line in Romans where St. Paul says that when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit inside of us, with groans too deep for words, expresses the prayer. Praying without ceasing is precious to—and there is a double meaning to it, but the first meaning is simply that we let what's in our heart, the groans that are too deep for words, express themselves. But the saints also put a line on that which I very much like. I think it's the final challenge in terms of adult spirituality, and that is the whole question of recollection.

Lydia Talbot: You just reminded us also of the distinction between formal prayer and personal prayer. I think of the Rosary, of "Hail Mary, full of grace" and how that mantra is so uplifting, as you have instructed us that prayer lifts our minds and hearts to God. And, of course, the Lord's Prayer. I was at an ecumenical service recently where the Lord's Prayer was prayed in many different tongues and it was all about unity. Say more about that distinction between formal prayer and our personal prayer.

Ron Rolheiser: There is still another distinction inside of this. There is formal communal prayer which is when we pray together in a church at a Sunday service, at a Eucharist, or some kind of joint prayer like this week when Christians pray for church unity together. That's formal communal prayer. Then you still have formal private prayer where you may be saying prayers out of a book. But then there's still deep, private prayer which I have my own word for. I like to call that affective prayer. The prayer of affectivity. I think in Roman Catholicism we've classically used the word "devotional" prayer, which is good, but I think carries a lot of baggage. I like the word affectivity. One of my spiritual mentors in my life, an old French Canadian priest who was my spiritual director, always would tell people this: in your prayer you need to open yourself up, that sometime in your life you will hear God say to you, "I love you," because before that happens nothing will ever be right. You'll be searching for this and searching for that and so on. That's the deep, private prayer and won't be so much a formal prayer out of a book, that will do that for you. That's when we are driven to our knees by circumstance, not by church

conscripted.

Lillian Daniel: I love the idea of people wearing the t-shirt that says “There’s no wrong way to pray.” But I can imagine somebody challenging that and saying surely there are some forms of prayer that could be destructive. I mean imagine, for example, a murderer praying for success in murdering somebody or a prayer in which you’re lifting up to God hatred and perseverating on negative things. Is that dangerous or is that also not a wrong way to pray?

Ron Rolheiser: A very good point. It’s dangerous, but it doesn’t mean that the opposite isn’t more dangerous. I mean, there is a wrong way to pray if prayer is purely malicious or completely self-serving or insincere or dishonest. There is a wrong way to pray. But sincere prayer might start out, let’s say, like, “I’m murderous. I want to kill somebody.” The whole idea is, hopefully, the prayer will be what helps mellow your heart out. Sometimes it’s very important that this gets expressed. Somebody pointed this out in a newspaper column some years ago. It said that sometimes when you have these mass murderers—say at Virginia Tech or wherever—often times people will say, “I’d never expected it from this guy! He seemed like such a nice person.” So obviously he had never expressed the, “I hate people. I want to kill somebody!” We say it as an emotional release which often times helps us to preciously release the emotion. But prayer should be a safe place to say these things. The whole idea is if you are contacting God in sincerity—praying sincerely and not purely for manipulative reasons—then it’s like a parent and a child, and the parent is going to help the child sort this out.

Lillian Daniel: A two-way conversation.

Lydia Talbot: Ron, have you ever prayed for someone you loved who is dying? Or someone you care deeply about who is terminally ill? How does that prayer sound? What kind of advice do you have for people who are struggling with being at the bottom of the pit?

Ron Rolheiser: I’m praying for at least five people close to me right now who have cancer, two or three who are terminal. Well, the prayer petition, Jesus invites us to that and so does every major spiritual tradition. But that’s not without problems in terms of explaining it formally like this, because isn’t God already trying to heal this person? Does God need reminders from us? And that’s true. Yet Jesus says, ask for what you need, pray for those whom you love, and so on. Sometimes it’s made easier. I’ll give you an example of a woman friend who has very serious cancer right now and probably will die. I went to see her in the hospital and she said, “Look, you don’t have to pray for me that I get better, maybe I will, maybe I won’t. But pray that I handle this well. I don’t know how I’m going to handle this.” This is a wonderful petition to pray for her in this way.

Lydia Talbot: And the knowledge that others are praying for us if we are ill is a critical part of the healing process, is it not?

Ron Rolheiser: Very much so. It’s a Christian concept—but in other traditions, too—about the mystical body of Christ. The way you and I are communicating now, that’s one way. But we say there is also a deeper communication underneath.

Lillian Daniel: I love the expression that we pray for people in mind and body and spirit. All three in healing. Thank you so much for being with us today, Ron.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

Lillian Daniel: And now writer Tom McGrath has a final thought on prayer.

REFLECTION

Tom McGrath: My grandmother taught me to pray, but probably not in the way you think. Sure, I often saw my grandmother praying, and a well-worn prayer book was on her night stand. But she never actually took me aside and taught me what to say and how to say it. Instead, she provided me valuable clues about the One I would be praying to. You see, grandma loved us with a love that was fierce, unwavering, and radically faithful. I knew she would move mountains to protect me or any of her great brood of grandchildren. We could ask anything of her and know that she would be on our side and at our side. Because of her great example, I have come to rely on that same promise of fierce love and protection from God, the One who creates us in his own image. It was in grandma that I most clearly noticed the family resemblance.

CLOSING REMARKS

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Tom, and our thanks again to Father Ronald Rolheiser, Ronne Hartfield, and to you for joining us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today’s program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.