

Jesus' instructions about prayer always remind me of something my pastor said when I was going to a Methodist church in Chicago. He said, apropos of I don't know what, "You don't have to pray in a certain way all the time. You can just shoot a prayer out without thinking about it first, just in your own words." Now this may not strike you all as radical genius, but it kind of was for me, and I felt liberated and invited to share my thoughts with God just whenever, rather than saving them up for an appropriate time, by which time I would have forgotten them or second-guessed myself. The really transformative thing about this revelation, of course, was that it allowed me to relate to God spontaneously and naturally, which is what I think Jesus is teaching here.

"Do not heap up empty phrases," he warns them, and then he suggests an alternative, which is to address God as beloved elder. God is your first family. You can just get right to the point; you know each other that well. This naturalness and simplicity in no way contradicts the ineffability and majesty of God; it is an aid to us, the pray-ers, to keep it real—to keep ourselves real.

That's the theme I see running through all of today's reading: keep it real. Be real when you pray. Let your fasting not be a performance for others but a practice for yourself, an avenue of transformation. Be honest about what you really value, and if you discover that what you really value is treasure on earth, give that another hard look because you may be making a big mistake. These are all instructions on how pious people with good intentions can stay honest, which is a pre-requisite for spiritual growth.

Rather dubiously, I read an article on fasting by a woman who had grown up

in our brand of pragmatic, matter-of-fact Protestantism, which does not do fasting. She felt drawn at one point to fasting as a spiritual exercise, and the fast she chose was to abstain from meat and dairy two days a week. Later she chose for a while to miss a full meal. One of the ways this changed things for her was that it drew her attention to a whole constellation of thoughts and feelings she had around food and hunger, which allowed her to examine them more intentionally and to be less compulsive about acting on those feelings. I get the image of her disentangling from a web of ropes she'd been carrying around with her, and moving through life a little more naturally and spontaneously.

The instruction Jesus gives, that we should forgive others their trespasses, is a direct invitation to bring in Anne Lamott, because she above all others speaks authoritatively about a) how totally impossible and ridiculous it is to try to forgive objectively horrible people and b) how it makes life better when you do. In her newest book, *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope*, she has a chapter called "Don't Let Them Get You to Hate Them," which is pretty much all about the struggle to be real *and* not hateful.

Struggling with the awfulness of political dysfunction and climate change and all the rest, Anne Lamott asked God for help with the "mess of me." The second thing God sent her was an eight year-old boy in her Sunday School class. She asked him if he thought God was always with him, helping him, and he replied, "Maybe forty percent." And she says, "Forty percent! What if I could reduce my viral load by forty percent?" That led her to focus on being more aware, which reminded her that in her case, she often felt hatred because she was afraid, and while fear causes a

fight-or-flight reaction, hatred gives her quick-acting, powerful energy: swift, stimulating, toxic. It's a mood-altering drug; it doesn't actually help change things.

Anne's pastor had wrapped up a sermon about how hate can't drive out hate by saying, "Just don't let them get you to hate them." She was a little underwhelmed by this advice at first, but the longer she lived with it, the more powerful she found it. She says, "Haters want us to hate them, because hate is incapacitating. When we hate, we can't operate from our real selves, which is our strength." That's exactly it; our real selves are our strength. That's what Jesus keeps pointing us back to.

Anne writes about several exercises she gave herself to do, to disentangle her real self from the contorting bindings of hate. And over time, she says,

Becoming intimate with hate slowly increased my self-respect. I did not inherit the genetic coding to feel sure of myself. (I'm sure your DNA is just *fine*.) Hate helped me meet my inner traffic cop, employed to stand in for self-care, who ticketed and shamed my brothers and me as a misguided public service when we fell short. An innocent mistake.

Look at what she did there. She discovered that a coping mechanism was just that, and it wasn't necessary any more. By paying attention to when she felt hateful, she identified one role that hate had played for her, and was able to thank it and let it go away. She became more her real self. Having made that move, she reflects on how much alike we human beings all are.

The main politician I'm thinking of and I are always right. I, too, can be a blowhard, a hoarder, needing constant approval and acknowledgement, needing to feel powerful. This politician had an abusive father, but he managed to stay alive, unlike his brother. I don't think he meant to grow up to be a racist who debased women. But he was raised afraid and came to believe that all he needed was a perfect woman, a lot of money, and maybe a few more atomic weapons. He must be the loneliest, emptiest man on earth, while I am part of a great We, motley old us. We show up, as in the folktale about stone soup, and we bring and give and put what we can into the pot,

and this pot fills up, and we know it.

Jesus is giving us instructions for living authentically, which includes our spiritual formation. He's really just telling us to be honest and transparent, because affectations like eloquent public prayer or ostentatious fasting are not avenues to greater intimacy with God. They are substitutes for the real thing, and they keep us from developing the real thing.

I'll end with more Anne Lamott.

No one can take this hatred off me. I have to surrender it every time I become aware of it. This will not go well, I know. But I don't want my life's ending to be that I was toxic and self-righteous, and I don't know if my last day here will be next Thursday or in twenty years. Whenever that day comes, I want to be living, insofar as possible, in the Wendell Berry words, "Be joyful though you have considered all the facts," and I want to have had dessert. Maybe insanity will not change to wisdom and a focus on the common good any time soon, but I can bring less hate to the pot of stone soup, the common well. . . .

Hating the way I was feeling helped me give up Camel cigarettes thirty-two years ago, and then alcohol. It is good to surrender things that poison us and our world. Am I free of such toxicity now? Well, about forty percent, and that is a pretty good deal. I'll take it.

Hate weighed me down and muddled my thinking. It isolated me and caused my shoulders to hunch, the opposite of sticking together and lifting our hands and eyes to the sky. The hunch changes our posture, because our shoulders slump, and it changes our vision, as we scowl and paw the ground. So as a radical act we give

up the hate and the hunch as the best we can. We square our shoulders and lift our gaze.

Father/Mother in heaven,
in your goodness
you pour out on your people all that they need,
and satisfy those who persist in prayer.
Make us bold in asking,
thankful in receiving,
tireless in seeking,
and joyful in finding,
that we may always proclaim your coming kingdom
and do your will on earth as in heaven. Amen.