Prayers Plainly Spoken

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To Joel Adam
and his parents
Laura
and Adam

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Preface

I am in debt to the students at the divinity school at Duke University for allowing me to pray before my classes in Christian Ethics. I am grateful to those students (particularly the Reverend Jennifer Fitts) for urging me to make these prayers available beyond the classroom. Without such encouragement I would have never had the courage to venture out and publish these prayers. But then without Rodney Clapp I would have never known how to imagine this book; his skill and friendship made the book possible. As I will explain in the introduction, that I am able to pray at all is my wife Paula's "fault." I pray I will never take her love of God or me for granted. Both loves, in quite different ways, are extraordinary. It gives me great pleasure to dedicate this book to another set of loves, Joel Adam, Laura and Adam Hauerwas. I pray God will grant them challenging and good lives.

Introduction

At Hauerwas family gatherings my father was the "designated pray-er." At Thanksgivings, Christmases, Easters, wedding anniversaries and all other occasions when that large crew of five other uncles and their families would gather at my grandparents' house—at that moment just before we ate, my father would be asked to pray. Looking on with my many cousins, I was in awe that it fell on my father to "ask grace." I was not sure why this extraordinary task was assumed to be fulfilled only by my father, but there was no doubt that he was the chosen one. So pray he did, and I vaguely remember they were good, if quite similar, prayers.

Of course, we were a Southern family. In the South it was assumed someone in the family would be born with the gift of prayer. I do not know how my father was the one discovered to have this gift. By the time I came along, it was an assumed family fact. But I had no reason to doubt that my father was rightly chosen. After all, he prayed often at our family meals, particularly after church when the minister was invited over for fried chicken.

My problem began when I discovered that the gift of

prayer was assumed to be genetic. As my father's son I was to inherit the mantle of the "gift of prayer." It was one thing for it to be assumed, in the shadow of my father the bricklayer, that as a Hauerwas I would learn to lay brick. I liked that. I did not like the idea that I was to become the "pray-er."

For the truth of the matter is that I was no good at it. I just could not get the hang of praying. I was suddenly asked to be "pious" for thirty seconds. It always felt phony to me. After I was "called" to the ministry at fourteen (a call that for the good of the church never came to fruition), I still could not pray. Even after I had gone to seminary and later finished a Ph.D. in theology, I could not pray off-the-cuff. I understood that prayer is the heart of the Christian life, but I could not, so to speak, "pray on my own." It was one thing to pray the prayers of the church, which I found I could not live without. It was quite another thing to pray my own prayers.

Such was the state of things until I came to teach at Duke Divinity School. Paula Gilbert, now my wife, asked me if I prayed before class. I had never prayed before a class. Teaching undergraduates at Augustana College and the University of Notre Dame, it just did not seem appropriate. It was, of course, assumed that undergraduates at Notre Dame were Catholics, but even there I thought prayer before class could not help but be coercive. Yet I could find no excuse to offer Paula why a prayer should not be said before each class in a divinity school's core course in Christian ethics. So, obedient to her instruction that I should pray before class, I resolved to do so even though I did not like it. This book is the result of that resolve.

I knew that I lacked the depth required to pray "sponta-

neously." So each morning before the class I took time to write a prayer. I did not know what I was doing, but I was determined to do it. It was not long before students began asking me for copies of my prayers. I was not sure what to make of such requests, partly because I did not want to become overly self-conscious about what I was doing. After all, prayer should not call attention to itself, but rather to the one to whom we pray. Yet it was unmistakably clear that something I was doing when I prayed struck a chord in some of my students.

The students even began to ask me to publish these prayers, but I resisted that suggestion. Among the reasons I did not want to publish these prayers was the problem I have always had with prayer itself: I did not want to appear pious. Of course I have no reason to fear appearing pious, simply because I am not pious, or at least I do not manifest those forms of behavior that are usually associated with piety. I should like to think I have a due reverence for those people and things that are properly due reverence, but I do not try to be "holy." I fear "holiness" because in our time "holiness" is too often one of the ways the truthfulness of religious claims is lost.

Notice, for example, how in spite of our best intentions our attention wanders when someone "drops" into the pious tones and set formulas we associate with saying a prayer. That we find it hard to listen, I suspect, is because the "holiness" associated with prayer makes the attitude of prayer more important than the words we say. All that matters is someone is praying. As a result, prayer becomes an emotive exercise that only confirms our anthropocentric needs.

That these prayers are not "holy" is one of the reasons I suspect some of my students wanted them available to be read

again. If anything, these prayers are plain. They are so because I discovered I could not pray differently than I speak. In other words, I thought it would be a mistake to try to assume a different identity when I prayed. I figured (Texans "figure") that God could take it because God did not need to be protected. I think I learned this over the years by praying the Psalms in church. God does not want us to come to the altar different from how we live the rest of our lives. Therefore I do not try to be pious or to use pious language in my prayers. I try to speak plainly, yet I hope with some eloquence, since nothing is more eloquent than simplicity.

On the Nature of These Prayers

It would be disingenuous of me, however, to pretend that what it means for these prayers to be "plain" is that they are not the result of "thought." I am a theologian. I have spent my life privileged to read Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth and, God help me, Wesley. If what I have learned from them—and from so many other Christians who may not have been theologians but lived wonderful Christian lives—does not make a difference in how I have learned to pray, I should be counted among the most ungrateful of God's creatures. False humility is no less false when feigned in the interest of being "just another Christian." I am "just another Christian," but I am also one who has been given certain responsibilities because of the gifts of time and learning the church has made available to me.

Of course it is also a very dangerous thing for a theologian to pray or, at least, write prayers for the church. Those with theological training may be tempted to write prayers that reflect their particular theological perspective or, perhaps even worse, to make or develop an argument. Such a temp-

tation, of course, is but an indication of the peculiar character of modern theology. Modernity marks the time when theologians began to believe that their task is to explain the truth of what Christians believe in a manner that assumes the explanation is truer than the belief itself. Such theology is no longer the servant of the church but tries to be its master. That I have been critical of this theological project makes me no less subject to it, just to the extent that we too often become what we oppose.

That said, however, it is my hope that these prayers reflect what I have learned about what it means to be a Christian. I have had and I continue to have good teachers in prayer. I will be disappointed if those who have read some of my other work do not find some of what I think reflected in these prayers. Theology is the never-finished discipline of learning to speak with, to and about God. Prayer, accordingly, is our most determinative speech. Any theology, therefore, that is finally not about helping us to pray cannot be Christian. In an odd way, then, this book represents the most important testing of my theological work.

I hope many or even most people who read these prayers will be new to the work of Stanley Hauerwas. You do not need to know my "theological position" in order to read and hopefully to pray these prayers. It is my fervent desire that all anyone needs to pray these prayers is a common desire to worship the God found in Jesus Christ. Of course I would not object if some, on reading these prayers, are led to read other things I have written. But I certainly do not think that is necessary. If you need to know what I think to understand these prayers, then they are not prayers worth praying.

That most of these prayers were written to be prayed before a class, moreover, does not mean they are "academic."