

The prayers of Martin Luther King Jr.

John Dear | Jan. 15, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Recently, I came across a new collection of prayers by Martin Luther King Jr., *Thou, Dear God: Prayers that Open Hearts and Spirits* [1] (edited by Lewis V. Baldwin, Beacon Press, 2012). For his birthday today, I thought I'd offer here a sample of those prayers to encourage us on our journey so we might be, like Dr. King, people of prayer, peace, justice and nonviolence.

His prayers, of course, raise questions about our own prayers. To whom do we pray? How do we pray? What do we ask for? Thomas Merton taught us the apophatic prayer of sitting in the void, in darkness, while St. Ignatius Loyola taught us to use our imaginations and fantasize about the Gospel (pick a story, imagine you are in it, feel what it's like, notice what Jesus looks like, listen to what he says to you, and so forth). Medieval monks taught *lectio divina*, reading the scriptures prayerfully, while others emphasize the prayer of communal liturgy and Gospel hymns. Personally, I recommend 30 minutes of silent time every day to dwell in intimate love with the God of peace, with the nonviolent Jesus.

Every Christian tradition advocates intercessory prayer -- begging God for what we need. "Ask and it will be given to you," Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 7:7](#) [2]). "Ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you" ([John 15:7](#) [3]). "All that you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it and it shall be yours. And when you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance so that your heavenly God may in turn forgive you" ([Mark 11:24-25](#) [4]).

Contrary to what we often hear in our parishes, I think we should beg God for every *global* gift of disarmament, justice and nonviolence as a way to pray for the coming of God's reign. Our public intercessions should be bold and clear, like this: "For an immediate end to the U.S. war in Afghanistan; for the abolition of drones, handguns, machine guns, bombs, fighter bombers, Trident submarines, nuclear weapons and the death penalty; for all the relatives of those who have died from U.S. warfare, that they may have restitution and comfort; for a redistribution of the world's wealth so that every child will have food, clothing, housing, health care, education and dignity; for policies that protect the environment and halt global warming; for an end to extrajudicial murder, rendition, torture and Guantanamo; for our conversion to Gospel nonviolence; for the church's rejection of the just war theory and active practice of the Sermon on the Mount." These are the intercessory prayers, I think, that God wants to hear, that get us beyond our cultural narcissism into compassion for the whole human race. To pray such prayers is to work publicly through the grace of God that they might be answered.

This is what I hear in Dr. King's prayer -- a cry for strength to carry on the work of peace and justice; for courage to be nonviolent, come what may; for blessings on the movements for civil rights, justice and peace; for healing for the oppressed and the oppressors; and for the coming of God's reign of peace, love and nonviolence here and now. May all our prayers for peace with justice be answered!

Thou Eternal God, out of whose absolute power and infinite intelligence the whole universe has come into being, we humbly confess that we have not loved thee with our hearts, souls and minds, and we have not loved

our neighbors as Christ loved us. We have all too often lived by our own selfish impulses rather than by the life of sacrificial love as revealed by Christ. We often give in order to receive. We love our friends and hate our enemies. We go the first mile but dare not travel the second. We forgive but dare not forget. And so as we look within ourselves, we are confronted with the appalling fact that the history of our lives is the history of an eternal revolt against you. But thou, O God, have mercy upon us. Forgive us for what we could have been but failed to be. Give us the intelligence to know your will. Give us the courage to do your will. Give us the devotion to love your will. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

God, help us as individuals and as a world to hear it now before it is too late: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and God's justice and all these other things shall be added unto you."

God grant that as we go out and face life with all of its decisions, as we face the bitter cup which we will inevitably face from day to day, God grant that we will learn this one thing and that is, to make the transition from "this cup" to "nevertheless."

O God, we thank you for the fact that you have inspired men and women in all nations and in all cultures. We call you different names: some call you Allah; some call you Elohim; some call you Jehovah; some call you Brahma; some call you the Unmoved Mover. But we know that these are all names for one and the same God. Grant that we will follow you and become so committed to your way and your kingdom that we will be able to establish in our lives and in this world a brother and sisterhood, that we will be able to establish here a kingdom of understanding, where men and women will live together as brothers and sisters and respect the dignity and worth of every human being. In the name and spirit of Jesus. Amen.

God, give us strength of body to keep walking for freedom. God, give us strength to remain nonviolent, even though we may face death.

God, grant that we wage the struggle with dignity and discipline. May all who suffer oppression in this world reject the self-defeating method of retaliatory violence and choose the method that seeks to redeem.

God, remove all bitterness from my heart and give me the strength and courage to face any disaster that comes my way.

O God, we thank you for the lives of great saints and prophets in the past, who have revealed to us that we can stand up amid the problems and difficulties and trials of life and not give in. We thank you for our foreparents, who've given us something in the midst of the darkness of exploitation and oppression to keep going. Grant that we will go on with the proper faith and the proper determination of will, so that we will be able to make a creative contribution to this world. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray.

O God, make us willing to do your will, come what may. Increase the number of persons of good will and moral sensitivity. Give us renewed confidence in nonviolence and the way of love as taught by Christ. Amen.

Eternal God, out of whose mind this great cosmic universe, we bless you. Help us to seek that which is high, noble and good. Help us in the moment of difficult decision. Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brother/sisterhood that transcends race or color.

God, we thank you for the inspiration of Jesus. Grant that we will love you with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, even our enemy neighbors. And we ask you, God, in these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, to be with us in our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawn. Amen.

We thank you for your church, founded upon your Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon you. Help us to realize that humanity was created to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace. Help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children -- Black, White, Red, Brown and Yellow -- will rejoice in one common band of humanity in the reign of our Lord and of our God, we pray. Amen.

John Dear lead [a retreat](#) [5] on nonviolence with Roshi Joan Halifax on Feb. 15-17 at the Upaya Zen Monastery in Santa Fe, N.M., and will speak for the abolition of nuclear weapons with Martin Sheen and Archbishop Desmond Tutu at an international anti-nuclear conference March 2-5 in Oslo, Norway. He will lead a retreat, "[Jesus the Peacemaker](#) [6]," April 5-7 in Pennsylvania. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to [John Dear's website](#) [7]. One of John's essays appears in the new book [A Faith Not Worth Fighting For](#) [8]. His book [Lazarus, Come Forth!](#) [9] explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book [Challenging Empire](#) [10]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, [Divine Rebels](#) [11] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including [Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings](#) [12], [Put Down Your Sword](#) [13] and [A Persistent Peace](#) [14], are available from Amazon.com.

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