Rev. Dr. Steven Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 139: 1-18; "Praying," by Mary Oliver
November 1, 2026

A Meditation on Prayer,
And on Carleen Gerber's 50th Anniversary at FCCOL

"Teach us how to pray," is what the disciples say to Jesus one day in the Gospel of Luke. It's a curious request, if also an understandable one. Curious because they've been with Jesus every day, and one might think they would intuitively know how to pray, if only from direct observation of Jesus himself. But understandable because most human beings come to the activity of prayer feeling wholly inadequate, and not a little self-conscious. It is a simple form of address, and yet it is also one of the most mysterious activities that human beings undertake.

Prayer is something like singing. When we are young, we simply sing, giving no thought as to how our voices might sound. We pay no mind to the skill we possess, or to what others might think of our singing. But over time, many of us go silent, aware of our shortcomings, aware of an audience, aware of most of all, of ourselves. When that happens, an essential piece of our humanity is suppressed, and eventually forgotten. It is the part of ourselves that feels deeply. It is the part of ourselves that is willing to express feelings spontaneously. It is the part of ourselves that is unguarded, vulnerable, in touch with our own creativity. When we sing as adults, we recover some of those lost features of our personhood.

And so it is with prayer. Children often address themselves to God, or to a transcendent Something or Someone beyond them, with a spontaneous and unaffected immediacy. It's not difficult. It just emerges, like a song. But sometime in adolescence, that immediacy goes away, as critical thought begins to take shape within us. And so we must learn to do what used to come naturally. We must remember what we once did with ease. And so we must say, along with the disciples, "Teach us to pray." Jesus does exactly that by returning his disciples to a kind of childlikeness. "Our Father," his prayer begins, a form of address spoken as if by a child.

It is fitting that in her 50 years of ministry here at FCCOL, Carleen has been teaching people to both sing, and also to pray. Her ministry began when she was asked to fill in on the organ for a number of weeks, after which she stayed on as our music director, in effect, teaching people to sing. In time, she transitioned to the pulpit, where, on many Sundays, she has taught us how to pray.

To encounter her prayers again in written form, we come to understand how skillfully the prayers themselves are woven. Carleen's words are spare, and precise. Her images are always carefully chosen. Like her hero, Emily Dickinson, her imagination extends outward radially - from a fixed center on the Connecticut River, say, to distant places of the globe, and then toward the cosmos, toward God. There is an art to these prayers that is matched by the paintings that Angie Falstrom has contributed to this volume, a dialogue of image and word that is itself a silent form of address, one to the other.

Beneath the composition, though, we can sense Carleen's person. We sense in her a stillness. We sense in her an attentiveness to the world around her, and a willingness to pay attention. We sense in her a person of deep integrity. We sense in her a calm, and a steady assurance that there is a why to all our living. We sense in her a hope, that beyond the tumult of the week's events, there is an abiding Love that holds us all.

Prayer, we come to learn, doesn't have to do with technique, so much as it does with being - to be in such a way that prayers like these can emerge. This requires practice. It requires a long apprenticeship to the majesty and the mystery of the world. Most of all, though, it requires a return to a kind of childlike vulnerability and openness. These are the things that Carleen has modeled for us. These are the things she has taught. Not so much how to do something like pray, but how to be, in order that prayer might emerge. Not so much how to string words together, but how to open a doorway.

When we first shared with Carleen that we would be honoring her on this day, she was characteristically reluctant to have so much attention focused upon her. We did, after all, celebrate her retirement eight years ago! When she realized we were going to do this with or without her consent, she shared with me a paragraph late in her book, found in the acknowledgement section. Focus on this, she said. Here is the paragraph:

> "I am deeply grateful for the encouragement this congregation has given me to pursue ordained ministry, exploring indigenous religions and helping to shape critical and courageous experiential mission engagement work, exploring new dimensions of mission in dialogue and partnership. Together we have created new paths for understanding the breadth and depth of the human experience in a world of kaleidoscopic diversity and beauty."

When she has prayed, Carleen has opened to us a doorway, not only into her soul, but into our own. That doorway, we learn, swings not only inward, but out, into all the world. Carleen, you have been to us all a partner and a friend. You have been, with us, a fellow traveler and explorer of the human spirit. For me personally, you have been a trusted confidante and colleague. You have been my family, as you have been for many others in this room. Thank you for helping us to recover that part of ourselves where prayers and where songs can emerge. Thank you for ensuring that the doors we open in our prayers and our music swing not only inward, but out. Thank you for ushering us into something approaching the holy.