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## *Is It Hard to Pray? ... Kum Ba Yah*

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*  
by Dean Sam Candler**

About a month ago, I found myself singing the old spiritual song, *Kum Ba Yah*, with a large group of friends. As I sang it, I found myself cringing at the impression many people have formed of that song. Have you noticed, lately, how so many speakers dismiss that song? Have you noticed how people actually use it as a symbol of sentimentality and impotence? For instance, in the midst of some sort of difficult negotiation, someone will say, “Well, we are not going to just sit around in a circle and sing *Kum Ba Yah!*” For some unfortunate reason, that song has become a symbol of conflict avoidance and cheap sentimentality.

That is not how it should be. As far as researchers can tell, the earliest recordings and history of the song, *Kum Ba Yah*, comes from the early 1920s—and it comes from one of the great cultures of our country, the Gullah culture in the southeastern United States. Many of you who have spent time on the coast of Georgia, or South Carolina, or North Carolina, know the African slave history there. The Gullah culture emerged from those slavery conditions, and it developed its own dialects, like Geechee.

*Kum Ba Yah* did not develop from sentimental conditions at all. The words “Kum Ba Yah,” mean “Come By Here.” “Come by here, my Lord, Kum ba yah.” It was in the midst of violence and stress and oppression that people sang, “Please, Lord, come by here. Someone’s singing, Lord, come by here. Someone’s crying, Lord, come by here. Someone’s praying, Lord, come by here.” *Kum Ba Yah* is not an easy song.

In the same way, prayer is not easy, either. True prayer is quite difficult. We tend to think that everything was easy for Jesus. Nope, I don’t think so. Have you ever noticed that Jesus went up to mountains to pray? That he went out to deserted places to pray? Those are hard places to get to!

I don’t think prayer came easy for Jesus, and I don’t think it comes easy for us, either. For most of us, prayer is a mountain. It is hard. Perhaps that is as it should be, if, like Jesus, we are trying to encounter truth directly and honestly. If prayer is too easy, it may not be prayer yet. It may be just self-medication. Or mere self-assurance. Or it may even be avoidance. True prayer is hard, because true prayer seeks a direct encounter with truth.

One day, the disciples found themselves in a boat during a raging storm. I am sure they were frantic, flinging ropes and catching lines. That boat in a raging storm might be similar to one of our Atlanta afternoons when so much is falling on us: the storm of work, errands, decisions, groceries, family issues, worries, interruptions. There is no time to pray, we say, in the midst of such crises.

Where was Jesus when the disciples got into that boat? Apparently, he had gone up a mountain to pray! Then, suddenly, the disciples saw Jesus out there on the water, and I believe they prayed that simple song: “Lord, come by here. Kum Ba Yah.” And Jesus did come by, and he got into the boat with them, and the storm was calmed (John 6:15-21).

What is authentic prayer? True prayer is inviting God to be part of your condition, whatever it is. Whether you are singing, or crying, or laughing, or suffering, prayer is inviting God to be with you—wherever you are and whatever you are doing. To each condition of life, the singer sings *Kum Ba Yah*. “Come by here, My Lord, come by here.”



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