Participant Reading – Week Three

PRAYER

There is a place of quiet rest near to the heart of God.
Oh Jesus, blessed redeemer, sent from the heart of God.
Hold those who come before thee near to the heart of God.

Cleland B. McAfee

Prayer is that which brings us near to the heart of God. Prayer is not talk about God, or even simply talking to God. Prayer is about being in fellowship with God through words and silence. Prayer is a natural response to the God who longs to be in relationship with us. Prayer involves a willingness to surrender ourselves to God’s purposes and to trust in God’s ability to care for us.

There are different types of prayer: praise, confession, thanksgiving and supplication (or petition).

- In prayers of praise, we worship and adore God; we give thanks to God simply for being who God is.
- In confession, we acknowledge our sin and place our trust not only in God’s forgiveness, but in the power of his grace to change, renew and transform us.
- Thanksgiving springs from our joy and willingness to acknowledge God’s gifts and blessings in our lives.
- In supplication or petition, we present our requests before God; requests for our own needs and the needs of others.

It is not always easy to pray. Prayer is shaped by our understanding of who God is. If the earliest images and metaphors we were taught caused us to consider God a harsh and impersonal judge, prayer may seem to us a burden or a source of shame.

Furthermore, although prayer involves our being in fellowship with God, we may not always feel God’s presence. Sometimes in prayer we may feel nothing and wonder if our prayers are getting through. But Jesus reassures us that the heavenly Father knows what we need and is eager to respond to us. In Matthew 6.9-13, Jesus provides a pattern for prayer.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

This model prayer begins by acknowledging God’s holiness. When we pray, “your kingdom come; your will be done” it is a sort of poetic parallelism because Jesus assures us that, when we surrender to God’s will and purposes, the kingdom of God is made real and present through us. “Daily bread” is symbolic of all of our needs. We are to seek God’s provision day by day without unnecessary anxiety about the future (see Matthew 6.25-34). Furthermore, prayer – no matter how personal it is – is never just about “me and Jesus.” We pray with awareness that we are part of God’s family, the Church. And we recognize that we cannot cultivate our relationship with God independently; without consideration of our relationship with others. And so, even as we seek God’s grace and forgiveness, we express our willingness to forgive those who have wronged us. Jesus reminds us, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt. 6.14-15) Finally, Jesus – who endured the
temptations of the devil in the wilderness — teaches us to pray for deliverance or rescue from the evil one and his deceitfulness.

Often what makes prayer difficult is that scripture both encourages us to approach the throne of grace with boldness (Hebrews 4.16) and to ask, seek and knock with confidence (Matt. 7.7-8); meanwhile we are also reminded that we are to approach God with childlike trust and humility (Matt. 7.9-11). Sometimes holding these two attitudes in balance is what makes prayer both challenging and mysterious.

Ultimately, the practice of prayer deepens our awareness of and responsiveness to God’s presence in our lives. As our fellowship with God deepens and expands, we come to understand more fully the words of St. Augustine of Hippo: “You have formed us for yourself [O God], and our hearts are restless 'til they find rest in you.”

As you prepare to meet with your group, read through Matthew’s version of “The Lord’s Prayer” (Matt. 6.9-13) and Luke’s version (Luke 11.2-4). If you are able, read these verses in multiple bible translations or versions. (To consider different translations of Matthew’s version of the prayer, refer to the subsequent page.) How do the different readings impact your understanding of the prayer? Do you have a favorite version? Take some time to pray through this prayer slowly, deliberately and thoughtfully, considering the significance of each phrase as you pray it. How is this prayer experience different from your experience praying the Lord’s Prayer during a morning worship service?
The Lord’s Prayer in four different versions/translations:

The New Revised Standard Version:
[Jesus said:] "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

The New International Version:
[Jesus said:] "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

The King James Version:
[Jesus said:] After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

The Message:
[Jesus said]: "You can pray very simply. Like this: Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are. Set the world right; do what’s best – as above, so below. Keep us alive with three square meals. Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others. Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil."
Session Three – Facilitator Discussion Outline
(Items needed: candles; “breath prayer” handouts)

- Remind the group of the format for your time together. Begin by lighting candles; hear a word of scripture; take a few moments to breathe deeply and relax; and, have a prayer time that will conclude with the Lord’s Prayer.

- Light a candle and explain that it is a reminder to us of Jesus’ presence with us since Jesus is the light of the world. Invite members to come forward at their own pace and light a candle.

- Share this scripture based on Psalm 19.14 [or another scripture of your choosing]:
  As we gather together as your people in this time and in this space, O God, may the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

- Invite members to take a few moments to close their eyes and breathe deeply and slowly using these few moments to begin to relax and let go of the day’s tensions.

- Invite group members to name anyone or any situation for which they desire prayer. All they need to do is speak the name of the one in need since God already knows every need. Let them know that the prayer time will conclude with the Lord’s Prayer.

- Review with the group the different types (or categories) of prayers they read about this week: praise, thanksgiving, confession and supplication (or petition). Talk with them to be sure they clearly understand the differences between these kinds of prayers. Ask group members if they learned anything new about prayer through their reading this week? Ask them how they liked the experience of praying the Lord’s Prayer in different versions. Was there a particular version they liked best? If so, why? How did their experience with the Lord’s Prayer (on their own) this week differ from their experience of praying with our combined voices during Sunday worship?

- Share with the group that there are many different ways of praying. We can pray by meditating and making use of a visual object (such as a cross) or a single word (such as “peace”). As our reading emphasized, prayer is about sharing fellowship with God and being attentive to God’s presence. Prayer is about developing our relationship with God. More than a list of things we want from God for ourselves and others, prayer gets to the heart of discerning what it is we are seeking in a relationship with Christ. Read from John 1.35-39:
  NRS John 1:35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" 39 He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.

Remind participants that, as we pray, we express to God that which we are truly seeking in our lives; the deepest longings of our hearts. It is a dialogue. Through prayer, God asks us now (as Jesus asked his followers long ago) “What are you looking for?”
• One very ancient form of prayer that helped people be attentive to God’s presence was breath prayer. Breath prayer is a way to “practice the presence of God.” Many people use scripture, hymns, or choruses to fashion their breath prayer. It is something we can repeat (aloud or silently) to focus us in our prayer time; and, we can repeat it through the day to keep our focus on God. A breath prayer is something we can use every day, even when we are rushed and short on time. A breath prayer is as unique as the circumstances in our lives and our relationship with God. Let the group know that you will lead them through an exercise to begin to develop their own, unique breath prayer. [The attachment is a hand out you can give them at the end of your session. But do not distribute it now or they will be distracted by “reading instructions” rather than listening and experiencing moment by moment.] Lead them in this Breath Prayer experience:
  
  o Step 1: Close your eyes and focus on your breathing [allow some time here for quiet]
  o Step 2: Imagine God is calling you by name. God is asking of you as Jesus asked of his disciples long ago, “What are you looking for? What are you seeking?” [Pause here so there is time for participants to reflect]
  o Step 3: Respond to God what it is that you are seeking; express to God the deepest longings of your heart [pause and give time for reflection]
  o Step 4: Think of the various names or titles for God – Father, Mighty God, Good Shepherd, Savior, Advocate, etc. Choose the name or title that means the most to you. [pause and allow time for reflection]
  o Step 5: Now, silently combine the name and what you are seeking into one phrase. E.g. “Good Shepherd, lead and guide me.” [pause and allow time for reflection].

  Invite participants to share (if they so desire) what this breath prayer experience was like for them; inquire if they have any questions about the process of developing a personal breath prayer.

• Invite group members to share times or experiences in their lives that have made it difficult for them to pray. What obstacles or impediments to prayer have they experienced? One impediment to prayer can be our own reluctance to give up control. Prayer is an act of trust and submission to God and God’s purposes. Quaker pastor and author, Richard Foster, discusses Submission as a spiritual discipline. When we pray “thy will be done,” we are submitting to God and God’s purposes for our lives and in our world. Foster teaches that there can be great freedom and liberty in submission. Prayer is, ultimately, an expression of submission, “the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way.” (Foster)

  Ask group members if there have been times in their lives when they have struggled to trust and to submit to God?

• Along with better knowing God, prayer also helps us know ourselves better. It helps us understand what our inward desires and motivations are. It helps us put our thoughts and actions into clearer perspective. One ancient form of prayer was called the “Prayer of Examen.” This form of prayer, developed by St. Ignatius, is a wonderful way to tune in and assess our lives on a daily or weekly basis. Lead the group in this abbreviated form of Ignatius’ Prayer of Examen:¹

  Invite group members to close their eyes and take a moment to consider...
  
  o Gift: What gifts have I received or given to others over the past few days; in other
words, when did I demonstrate love toward another, and when did I receive love from someone else? [allow quiet time for reflection]

- **Struggle:** Over the past few days, recall a time or times when you failed to give and receive love; recall times when you may have felt anxious or resentful about unresolved issues. [allow quiet time for reflection]

- **Invitation:** Now, ask yourself, “what blessing or kindness would I seek from God in order to move forward in an attitude of peace and wholeness?” What, among God’s many mercies (things like forgiveness, strength, peace, courage), do you most need from him today? Reflect on this as you breathe slowly and rest in God’s grace.

- Invite group members to reflect upon this prayer experience and encourage them to share any final thoughts, questions, ideas, etc. they have on the topic of prayer.

- Let members know that our scriptures also contain prayers of blessing, a type of intercessory prayer. Distribute the subsequent page which includes the Prayer of Blessing (as well as the Breath Prayer and Prayer of Examen) and ask members to “pair up” and pray this prayer of blessing over one another. When they are finished, invite them to come forward to extinguish their candles. Bid them God’s peace as you part.
This Handout should be distributed near the conclusion of the group session.

Developing a Breath Prayer:

- **Step 1**: Close your eyes and focus on your breathing [allow some time here for quiet]
- **Step 2**: Imagine God is calling you by name. God is asking of you as Jesus asked of his disciples long ago, “What are you looking for? What are you seeking?” [Give time for them to reflect]
- **Step 3**: Respond to God what it is that you are seeking; what you are yearning for in your life [give time for reflection]
- **Step 4**: Think of the various names or titles for God – Father, Mighty God, Good Shepherd, Savior, etc. Choose the name or title that means the most to you. [allow time for reflection]
- **Step 5**: Combine the name and what you are seeking into one phrase. E.g. “Good Shepherd, lead and guide me.” [allow time for reflection].

The Prayer of Examen:

- **Gift**: What gifts have I received or given over the past few days; in other words, when did I give the gift of love to another, and when did I receive a gift of love from someone else? [allow quiet time for reflection]
- **Struggle**: Over the past few days, recall a time or times when you failed to give and receive love; recall times when you may have felt anxious or restless about unresolved issues. [allow quiet time for reflection]
- **Invitation**: Now, ask yourself, “what gift or kindness would I seek from God in order to move forward in an attitude of peace and wholeness?” What, among God’s many mercies, do you most need from him today? Reflect on this as you breathe slowly and rest in God’s grace.

A PRAYER OF BLESSING:
May your ears be blessed that you may hear the gospel of Christ, which is the Word of life.  
May your eyes be blessed that you may see the light of Christ as he illumines your way.  
May your lips be blessed that you may sing the praise of Christ, the joy of the Church.  
May your heart be blessed that God may dwell there by faith.  
May your shoulders be blessed that they may bear the gentle yoke of Jesus.  
May your hands be blessed so that God’s mercy may be known through your actions.  
May your feet be blessed that you may walk in the way of Christ. Amen.

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1 This abbreviated form of the Prayer of Examen is based on an adaptation found in the book Paths to Prayer by Patricia D. Brown.