

The Gift of Prayer

Prayer is an important part of our worship, every week, and our faith has always encouraged us to make prayer a part of our daily lives, but we don't often talk about *how* we pray. And so we may wonder if there is a "right" way to pray and if we are doing it. What *are* we actually supposed to do when we pray?

Our answer will depend, to some extent, on whether we view God as a person-like being, or as the great mystery— what Marcus Borg calls the wonderful "More," the ground of being that is both beyond us and within us. It might seem easier to pray if we experience God as person-like, someone with whom we can have a conversation. But prayer can also be very rich and deep when we simply enter into the presence of mystery, opening our hearts to the warmth of love we may find there.

Returning to the "how" of prayer, there's no one "right" way to pray. But there are things we can do that help us to pray and, perhaps, make our prayer more transforming. When teachers talk with parents about how to help kids get their homework done, they often suggest setting up a regular time and place for it. It's the same with prayer. If we want prayer to be a central part of our lives, it may help to set aside a regular time and place for it. It's not that prayer can't happen, or doesn't happen, at other times and places. You might decide, for example, that you can use the time you spend in your car as your prayer time. But if you are busily planning all your errands, mentally writing a shopping list, or the roads are bad, it's not likely that you will be very present to God. And being present to God is what prayer is all about.

In Psalm 86, the psalmist writes, *Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.* Prayer begins when we lift up our souls— when we make ourselves present to God. I had one of those mini-epiphany, oh-yes-of-course, experiences when I read these wonderful words from New Testament scholar, Walter Wink: *It is a wholly erroneous habit of Christian prayer . . . to call on God or the Holy Spirit to be present with us. It is we who need to be present to the always present Holy Spirit.* Being present to the always present Holy Spirit, for most of us, means finding some time in the day, however brief, when we can truly offer ourselves to God who patiently waits for us to be there. We live such busy lives that it can be a challenge to find a regular time for prayer. I know that this is true for me, even as a clergy person. But I also know that if I don't make the time, I become less and less present to God.

While setting aside a regular time for prayer can be a challenge, setting up a space for prayer can be a joy, particularly if we use it as an opportunity for creativity and for discovering what helps us to move into God's presence. Think about your home and the land around it. Where do you, or would you, go to pray? The creation of sacred space is very individual, and this is truly a place where "whatever works" should be the rule. When you have decided where you will pray,

try lighting a candle, setting out a fresh flower, hanging up a meaningful image, or having your Bible or favorite book of devotions close at hand. Know also, though, that sacred space can be created anywhere without any addition other than the one who prays. Wherever we pray, we are on Holy Ground.

Another aspect of creating sacred space has to do with our bodies. We are incarnate beings, from the Latin *in carnis*— in the flesh. We are body as well as spirit, and how we sit or stand can make a difference in how we pray. What happens when you hear the words, “Let us pray”? Do you bow your head and close your eyes? This is what most of us have been taught to do. Let’s do it now. Close your eyes and bow your heads and simply be present to God.

(pause)

Now I’m going to ask you to make slight changes in your position, all the while remaining present to God. If they aren’t that way already, straighten your back and put both feet flat on the floor.

(pause)

Now place your hands slightly apart on your lap and turn them palm upward.

(pause)

Now raise your hands, still palms up, until they are about shoulder height.

(pause)

Now, if you are able, stand up, and, keeping your hands upraised, tilt your head back and open your eyes. As strange as this may seem to you, you are now in what is called the “*orans*” position. This is a position Jesus would have used for prayer, and the position used by the first Christians, in the Early Church. Some of the early Christian mosaics and frescoes show people praying in this way, and I was taught to use the orans position when I say the communion prayer.

Ok. You can sit down, now. How did that feel? Did your presence to God change as your position changed? Did any of the positions make you uncomfortable? All these positions are used for prayer somewhere in the world. I didn’t ask our Western bodies to assume the lotus position, or to lie down flat on our faces in full prostration, although millions also pray in these positions. What we do with our bodies when we pray is very much culturally conditioned, and it can be helpful to try stances from other cultures.

I first tried praying with my hands palm-up on my knees more than twenty years ago. At the time, I was under a lot of stress, and I realized that, even while I was praying, my hands were tightly fisted. I opened them, turned them upward, and began to pray simply, “Lord, keep my hands open to receive.” I knew that my closed hands were a symbol of all the ways that I was closed to God’s love and healing and that I needed to open them up. I return to that prayer and that position whenever my hands get clenched by stress or anxiety. I’ve also added the words “and to give” to my prayer: “Lord, keep my hands open to receive and to give,” because when I am open to receive, my hands fill up and spill over with the living water of God’s Spirit, and I have much more to give.

So here we are— we’ve found a time, we’ve created a space, and we’ve settled ourselves into a prayer position. Now what? Here again, the answer will be very individual. I sometimes begin my prayer with a reading, from the Bible, or a devotional guide, or whatever inspirational book I’m reading now. After my reading, I enter into twenty minutes, either of “Centering Prayer” or of meditation using the breath.

Centering Prayer is a form of Christian meditation— a way to be still and know that God is God. If we really want to listen for God “still speaking” in our lives, we need to stop talking, and Centering Prayer can help us to do this. The method is simple. Once we have settled ourselves for prayer, we allow a prayer word, or phrase, to arise in our minds. This could simply be the word “God,” or “Spirit,” or “love,” or a longer phrase, like “God be with me.” The “right” prayer words are those that help you to be present to God. The prayer word or phrase is repeated internally in rhythm with your breathing. If you are meditating with the breath, you simply attend to your out-breath as it leaves your body at the tip of your nose. I often find that I prefer attending to my breath because it grounds me. Words tend to keep me in my head, where I spend far too much time already.

Whenever you get lost in your thoughts, and, believe me, you *will* get lost in your thoughts, you simply let go of the the thoughts and return to the prayer word, or to the breath. As someone once put it, “We have monkey minds, and the prayer word throws the monkey a banana.” The important thing about this kind of prayer is not to be too rigid about it. If you are, you won’t want to keep doing it. As I said before, you’ll discover the runaway nature of your thinking. You’ll find yourself mentally writing a list of things you have to do, worrying about an unresolved problem, or reliving a difficult encounter with someone and rehearsing exactly what you should have said or want to say to them the next time you see them.

Don’t beat yourself up because your prayer isn’t more “pure.” Offer each situation up to God and return to your breath or prayer word. I have found, and centuries of tradition support this, that this form of prayer creates a space for God to speak to me through the insights and flashes of wisdom that arise. There are also very precious times, only too rare, when the distractions fade away, and I am in deep silence, deep peace, deep and blessed communion with God.

This is what I think Jesus looked for, and found, all those times he withdrew from the crowds to be alone. We see this pattern often, in the gospels, of Jesus seeking time alone with God either before, or after, a time of intense activity. Just as we try to follow in Christ’s footsteps in how we act in the world, perhaps it’s just as important for us to follow him, as he counsels in our gospel reading, into a place apart where we can be alone with God.

But what about the more “talkative” forms of prayer? Is there something wrong with them? Absolutely not! The life of prayer encompasses many forms of “talking to” God, including praise, thanksgiving, intercession— praying for others, which we’ll talk about next week, and petition— praying for our own needs. I will always be grateful to the Episcopal monk who gave me one of my first lessons in prayer. He advised me to always begin my prayer with

thanksgiving. This simple advice has a very profound effect. How often do we begin prayer with our worries and concerns? Sometimes, a worry or concern is the *only* thing that reminds us to pray. We are much more likely to seek God in the tough times than in the good. But when we begin our prayer with thanksgiving, we remember just Who it is we are talking to. We are addressing the very Ground of our being, who loves us, and supports us, and upholds us, and gives to us in a myriad of ways, if only we have eyes to see them. Giving thanks helps us to develop an eye for our blessings and often moves us spontaneously into praise.

We shouldn't hesitate, though, to also bring our troubles and concerns. The author of Psalm 86 turns to God in absolute trust, saying, *Give ear, O lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication. In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.* I have had people tell me that they find it difficult to pray for themselves. "I have no difficulty praying for others," they say, "but it doesn't feel right to ask God to do something for me." But I believe that it is God's desire for us to be healed, whole, and holy. So it's ok— indeed, it's good— to ask for what we need.

Prayer is ultimately an act of hope, even in the darkest of times— an act of hope based on our trust in God's steadfast love and in the goodness of God's purpose for us. When we pray, we are always, in some way, asking God to do something for us. Even in praise and thanksgiving, we are asking God to continue to be God in all God's magnificence. So please don't hesitate to pray for yourself.

Let us pray:

Loving God, you have given us the gift of prayer— the gift of communication and deep communion with you. Help us to be present to your ever present Holy Spirit, and, in trust, to turn to you with body, mind, heart, and spirit.

Amen.