

What is your first memory of prayer?

Are you gathered with family around the table before a meal?

Are you resting your head on a pillow as a parent whispers words of blessing and peace over you?

Are you sitting in a Sunday school classroom about to cover a lesson on Adam & Eve, Noah, Abraham & Sarah, David, Mary, Jesus, Paul, or some other biblical character?

Are you sitting squirrely in a pew as a parent or grandparent attempts to choral your youthful presence all while some robed figure stands up front and starts talking to God?

Philanthropist and fundraiser Kerry Robison, great granddaughter of John Raskob, builder and financier of the Empire State building, vividly recalls her first memory of prayer:

“I was eight years old. Solitude seemed urgent and necessary for me to concentrate on what I was experiencing. As I walked toward and around the lake, I was bursting with energy, with an overwhelming sense of gratitude, with limitless love and appreciation for what I could not even name as blessing. I yearned to communicate what I felt, but my childhood vocabulary was inadequate to the task. I walked faster, with greater earnestness, desperate to name my joy, express my gratitude, account comprehensively for the abundance for which I was grateful: my family, the setting, the example of my grandparents’ guests making this a better and more just world, my wonderful cousins, our laughter, postprandial piano music and Cole Porter songs, fireflies, safety, love. I didn’t know how to express it, and the frustration was nearly unbearable.

In an instant, everything changed. *I was not alone.* With sudden, inexplicable clarity and giddy relief, I realized that I didn’t have to have the vocabulary or wisdom to communicate what I felt. I was profoundly aware of companionship--quiet, divine presence--whose own joy and delight

matched mine. And I know that words were not necessary for God to know how deeply grateful I was. The conviction that I was not alone in my joy and that my gratitude was acknowledged and understood magnified my sense of blessing while bestowing a deep and enveloping peace. I could simply continue to walk forward assured that every thought, word, and desire I had ever had was known and revered by God. Being in the presence of God is to have access to infinite vocabulary--precise and impeccable. It is to be radically understood. This was my first experience of prayer, and all of my life I have been struck by its genesis in joy.”

Prayer takes many forms:

From deeply, bone aching laments,

to joyous songs of praise by pilgrims ascending God’s holy mountain;

From deeply concerned pleading for the safety, well-being, and wholeness of others and creation,

to the wellsprings of gratitude the burst and bubble up from those who’ve tasted and touched God’s grace;

From audible spoken, sung, shouted words,

to the inner groans of the spirit too deep for words, too low for sound registers.

Prayer takes many forms but ultimately prayer is presence.

Prayer is being present in the presence of God.

Prayer is being present to the presence of God in each and every person we encounter.

Prayer is being present to the presence of God in each and every moment we live--the delightfully good and the painfully difficult alike.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...

When Paul writes these words to the faithful in Thessalonica, he knows the depths of despair and suffering the human condition can bring.

But more than the constancy of turmoil and strife, Paul knows the faithfulness of God's love and presence.

Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Spanish mystic, remarked, "Prayer is an act of love."

Prayer is an act of love for God.
Prayer is an act of God's love for us.

So, prayer is finally about presence,
being available and alert and aware.
Available to God,
Alert to the Spirit's movement in this moment,
Aware of God's life and love moving towards us; surrounding us.

Yet, for many of us prayer can be intimidating.
Like Kerry,
we struggle to find the right words,
express the swirling desires of our hearts,
give voice to that which dwells deep within us.

But, if we embrace this notion of prayer as presence;
if prayer truly is just an opening of our spirit,
our soul,
however strong or fragile,
joyous or sorrowful,
it might be at the moment;
If prayer is simply and purely an opening of ourselves to God,
then the right words, the right posture, the right place, the right time,
are of little importance.

All that is necessary to pray without ceasing is simply the desire to pray without ceasing.
And if, even that is too much, the desire to have the desire to pray without ceasing will suffice.

In others words,
all we need is to open up our hearts and souls to God.

Thomas Merton, a renowned spiritual teacher and Trappist monk, writes of an experience that was transforming for him.

He was away from the monastery,
from the silence,
from those others cultivating a sense of God's ever present love and grace,
Merton had a vision--a revelation--

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers....There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Prayer--paying attention to the presence of God--prepared Merton's heart to receive this vision.

He became aware that this presence he sought in prayer extended beyond and into every person he encountered.

Being open to the loving presence of God,
Merton recognized he was invited to love all others.

Pray changes those who pray.

It can soften the hardest parts of our hearts to those who've hurt us.

It can pave the way to experience forgiveness and grace.

Prayer can spur us to action--acts of love and kindness.

Prayer can bring peace, love, and wholeness into our lives.

So, we practice this vital part of our faith lives each time we gather for worship.

We pray through songs and silence.

Pray Without Ceasing

August 21st, 2016

Rev. Eric Sunderland

We pray for God's presence to be known and manifest as we worship.

We pray for God's Spirit to move--mending, healing, creating, and celebrating.

We pray for people and places, near and far, hurting and rejoicing.

And most of all, whether we know it or not, our prayer is an opening of our own hearts to the very presence of God.

Take a moment now.

Sit comfortably.

Close your eyes.

Open your heart to the loving presence of God.

If other thoughts creep in,

That's okay.

Acknowledge them,

Imagine setting them aside for the moment,

Trusting you can pick them up again once we're done.

Considering using a word--a single word--like love, peace, grace, Spirit--

To draw yourself back into awareness--simple awareness of God's presence.

Spend a few moments in silence,

Spend a few moments with God in God's first language,

Silence.

Amen.

Friends

Prayer is being aware and open to God's presence.

As you go out,

As you pray this week,

Be aware of that love and grace that dwells within and all around you.