

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Prayer

- 3 Editorial
Mary H. Schertz
- 6 Facets of prayer in a pastorate
Roy Hange
- 10 Jesus and believers at prayer
Willard M. Swartley
- 20 Treasure in plain sight: Prayer in John Calvin's theology
Barry Murr
- 29 Holy ground, shaky ground, common ground: Public prayer in rhetorical perspective
Juanita Weaver
- 36 God's unconditional love, Billy Joel, and the healing power of centering prayer
Jay Freel Landry
- 42 Too deep for words: Learning about prayer from people with developmental disabilities
Paula Snyder Belousek
- 48 Laments—Misunderstood, truncated, exiled, silenced
Ron Guengerich
- 57 Prayer and action: Personal reflections
Duane Shank

- 64** From generation to generation: A conversation about prayer

Lois Schertz and Don Yost

- 70** The obscure night of prayer

Dan Schrock

- 78** On every side I find thy hand: A sermon on Matthew 7:7-11

Mary H. Schertz

- 84** Seven collects

Lois H. Siemens

- 86** Book reviews

Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition, edited by John D. Roth

Arthur Paul Boers

Islam: Religion, History and Civilization, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

John Derksen

Seeing the Text: Exegesis for Students of Greek and Hebrew, by Mary H. Schertz and Perry B. Yoder

Darrel Toews

Editorial

Mary H. Schertz

As I write this editorial on the anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, I am reminded of the early days of this journal's existence. In the first very uneasy days after 9/11, I was also writing an editorial for *Vision*. *Newsweek* and *Time* had both been caught off guard. Their issues for that week had been written, edited, and formatted before the event and were all but irrelevant when they appeared on the newsstands. By contrast, the contents of *Vision*, also produced prior to that day, seemed all the more pertinent. I read

Many of us often pray but rarely talk about it; the purpose of this issue of *Vision* is to open up a conversation about our praying.

through the articles gratefully, taking respite from those terrible events and also gaining perspective on them. Our hope for the journal is that it will be for you, too, a place of retreat from the demands of work and world—one that sends you back to those demands with renewed vision.

The life of the church, routine as it often is, takes on urgency in times of crisis. But without the everyday practices of our faith, we would have nothing to turn to when we are in great need. Prayer is at the heart of Christian practice, public and private. We pray on momentous occasions, those times marking the milestones and the disruptions of our lives, as well as in the seasons of the turning year. We pray in services of worship, in small groups, and before meals. We also pray in the course of the day. I was moved to hear a parent in our congregation talk about seeing her son stop and stand still on the playground one day. When she asked him what had happened, he told her matter-of-factly, "Oh, I was just getting quiet on the inside so I could hear God." Consciously and unconsciously, we—children and adults—are privileged to take everything to God in prayer: fears profound and silly, love and laughter, pain and grief, confession and celebration.

Many of us often pray but rarely talk about it; the purpose of this issue of *Vision* is to open up a conversation about our praying. Some articles in this issue will seem more personal than what we often publish: prayer is probably the most personal of our religious practices. As one of my colleagues puts it, prayer is talking to the one before whom we need not explain ourselves, the one who not only knows us better than any other but who knows us better than we know ourselves. The overall slant of this issue may also strike you as a bit more ecumenical than usual: prayer both transcends denominationalism and is also something about which Christian traditions have much to teach one another.

You may be surprised to find attention given to contemplative prayer practices: many contemporary heirs of Anabaptism are finding, as Arnold Snyder has suggested, that Anabaptism's early roots in medieval monasticism are resonating with twenty-first-century impulses and needs. I regret that evangelical prayer patterns did not find a greater voice in the issue, especially since that is my background. The prayer life that was a large part of my early formation may have embodied rhythms like those of the daily office, but the content was the immediacy of a personal relationship with Jesus, a dependence on God the Father, a hope for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The issue is rich. We begin with several articles that provide an overview. Roy Hange describes with passion and insight the range of prayer ministries, public and personal, in which he as a pastor engages. Willard Swartley, from the wellspring of a lifetime of teaching and practicing biblical spirituality, helps us get inside New Testament thinking about prayer. Barry Murr, a Presbyterian friend, writes about his pastoral journey in prayer. He shows us how John Calvin can help us clear away some of our misconceptions about prayer in order to construct a more sound theology of prayer, to serve an impassioned practice.

The next several articles look at some particular kinds of prayer. Juanita Weaver aids in thinking through the double audience of public prayer, which addresses God before the listening congregation. Jay Landry talks about how learning and teaching centering prayer has brought him into a deeper and wider relationship with God. Paula Snyder Belousek movingly describes the prayer life of people with developmental disabilities and

suggests ways we may all benefit from including nonverbal prayer in congregational worship. Ron Guengerich regrets that we have not used the lament Psalms in our public prayer life. He makes a case for the necessity of drawing more freely and fully from the range of the Psalter's resources if we are to mature in faith.

Next we turn to what I would have called "testimonies" at one point in my life, stories of how people pray. Duane Shank speaks from his experience about the need for prayer in a life of activism and gives us a glimpse of how he prays. We are privy to Lois Schertz and Don Yost's delightful intergenerational exchange on daily prayer. Dan Schrock opens tenderly and graciously one of the most difficult issues of prayer—praying when we do not perceive that God is listening. We then close the issue with a sermon about prayer and, fittingly, some of Lois Siemens's eloquent prayers.

My own prayer today is one of gratitude. I am thankful for writers who struggle with difficult questions and find words that open their minds and lives to us. I am thankful for readers who hear, test, and use the gifts the writers offer. I am thankful for editors who maintain and improve the trail that leads from the writer's heart to the reader's heart. I am thankful for the love of God, whose mission in the world this journal strives, above all, to serve.

Facets of prayer in a pastorate

Roy Hange

My earliest images of prayer are associated with life, death, and silent subservience. Our family said prayers before life-sustaining meals, and each day ended with the bedtime prayer that concludes, "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." During prayer in corporate worship we sat in bowed stillness, listening as the leader spoke.

I have now come to see prayer, public and private, as spiritual food. Praying is a life-giving process through which the Lord does not take our souls but remakes them. In this transformation of heart and spirit, we find new ways to stand before the Holy One as

If the same Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation prays with us, we should be able to expect new creation in various forms as a result of our prayer.

co-creators and as brothers and sisters of Christ. If the same Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation prays with us, we should be able to expect new creation in various forms as a result of our prayer.

Prayer has become for me, then, more about joining the mystery than about getting the right words or possessing the right receptivity. I experience prayer as a spiritual and emotional energy flowing in ritual transforma-

tion of what is around us and within us, moving all toward what it could yet be. True prayer functions to recast broken images of God, self, and others, as we express our longings: "Holy be your name"; "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Praying transforms broken social and political institutions: "Your kingdom come." Seen in this light, prayer has taken on many new facets in my pastoral and personal roles.

Facets of corporate prayer

Our congregation has incorporated various ritual prayers into our regular Sunday worship order.

We all say the Lord's Prayer at the end of the pastoral prayer. A great and unexpected blessing is the pleasure of hearing the children's voices praying with vigor at these moments.

When the offering is brought forward, we all sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" (OLD HUNDREDTH) as a prayer that frames our giving within a greater good.

When people leave our church or are sent in mission or service, they are invited to stand at the front of the church, hear a word of affirmation or sending from the pastors, share about what is next, and receive a sung blessing, "The Lord lift you up,"¹ from the congregation. We have found that this sung prayer has ritual power in the way it invites those leaving to move—with blessing foremost—from the past through the present into the unknown future. The prayer honors the relationship between those sent and those sending, enables us to say farewell, and places our fears of the new in a context of grace and benediction.

Each quarter, our sung service of communion becomes one long prayer of thanksgiving. This service includes opportunity for

I structure our prayer to flow in three movements: from the past in the power of remembering, to the present as a time of transformation of self or relationship, to the future as our imagination and vision are joined with the way of Christ.

anointing, prayer for individual needs, and a time to remember those who have died and are no longer with us in the flesh. For many people, obstacles to moving to deeper faith include unresolved grief and current trauma related to emotional, physical, or spiritual disease. The two movements—remembering loved ones who have died and anointing those in need—make grace and peace specifically available to those who are grieving and suffering. And when these gestures take place in congregational worship, a form of communion happens: we vicariously grieve with those who are grieving and are healed with

those who are being anointed. This process has potential to expand our capacity to be spiritually alive, because we are all cut to the heart. These two movements also open us to the deeper passion of Jesus' own journey as we then celebrate communion.

The grieving and healing we experience in this communion worship are a foretaste of the new heaven and new earth envisioned in Revelation 21:1-4, in which God is with God's people,

and death and mourning and crying and pain are no more. We read this promise as part of the service of anointing, during which those who remain in their seats identify and feel a profound resonance with those who come forward to be anointed for healing.

These and other forms of prayer in congregational worship (including invocations, prayers of confession, and pastoral prayers) function as encounters with the holy and the other within, beside, and beyond. The glimmering facet of corporate prayer is its capacity to refocus and re-form the spiritual and moral vision of a group in a way that transforms relationships. I repeatedly structure our prayer to flow in these three basic movements: from the past in the power of remembering, to the present as a time of transformation of self or relationship, to the future as our imagination and vision are joined with the way of Christ. Through our praying we then begin to see what could yet be, in our lives and in situations we confront.

Facets of personal prayer

My own journey with prayer has taken me down many paths. I have done contemplative or listening prayer, intercessory prayer, and phrasal prayer. In the last number of years I have moved from silently repeating the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”) to repeating the Sanctus:

*Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.*

I say the Sanctus through six breaths, and with the seventh breath, I rest. During the phrase “heaven and earth are full of your glory,” I look around me for new aspects of that glory in creation, in others, and in myself. The focus of this prayer is on glory, not on sin. This prayer suits my temperament, and especially addresses my need to be less pessimistic and more hopeful.

Many people have given up on praying because the dominant form of prayer they were taught does not fit their temperament. I

have found *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types*, by Chester Michael and Marie Norrisey, helpful to me and to others with whom I have walked.² Some spiritually hungry Christians turn toward eastern religions that offer other forms of prayer, without realizing that Christian tradition offers many ways to pray that Protestantism in the West and Mennonites in particular have not focused on.

Prayer for social change, prayer for individual healing

Two additional dimensions of prayer in my pastorate have developed in response to two books on prayer. In *Claiming All Things: Prayer, Discernment, and Ritual for Social Change*, George McClain looks beyond the domestication of prayer toward socially transformative prayer.³ In *Consenting to Grace: An Introduction to Gestalt Pastoral Care*, Tilda Norberg explores facets of healing prayer that are informed by the disciplines of psychology and therapy, yet move beyond these areas to work at emotional and spiritual transformation rooted in prayer.⁴ In a small group setting, a ritual Norberg developed has been especially meaningful for half a dozen people in our congregation; some have described this prayer for individual healing as life changing. The prayer ritual names the lies that have been part of a person's formation and ritually replaces those lies with new truths spoken to the person by the circle of those gathered to pray. Our experience of these rituals has been a further manifestation of the power of prayer to bring personal and corporate transformation.

Notes

¹ "The Lord lift you up" is no. 73 in *Sing the Journey* (Scottsdale, PA: Faith & Life Resources, 2005).

² Chester P. Michael and Marie C. Norrisey, *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types* (Charlottesville, VA: Open Door, 1984).

³ George D. McClain, *Claiming All Things: Prayer, Discernment, and Ritual for Social Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

⁴ Tilda Norberg, *Consenting to Grace: An Introduction to Gestalt Pastoral Care* (Staten Island, NY: Penn House Press, 2005).

About the author

Roy Hange is Co-Pastor—with his wife, Maren Tyedmers Hange—of Charlottesville (Virginia) Mennonite Church, and Overseer of the Harrisonburg District of the Virginia Mennonite Conference. He spent ten years with Mennonite Central Committee in the Middle East, nine of them working with Middle Eastern Churches.

Jesus and believers at prayer

Willard M. Swartley

The scripture Christians in the second and third centuries produced most frequently (in codex form) was the book of Psalms, according to Larry Hurtado, a scholar of early Christianity.¹ Why would that be the case? Because the Psalter was for them, as for Jesus, the primary book of prayer.

Prayer in the Gospels

Prayer was essential to Jesus' spirituality, reflecting his complete dependence on God. This prayer relationship is a constant in John's Gospel; there Jesus often affirms that he can do nothing on his own: he speaks what the Father gives him to speak and does what the Father gives him to do.

While all four Gospels portray Jesus as a person of prayer, Luke especially highlights this feature of Jesus' person and work:

Jesus prays on the occasion of his baptism. The heavens open and God speaks words affirming Jesus' identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (3:21-22).

Jesus prays when he withdraws from the crowds to a deserted place to find strength and direction for his ministry (5:16).

Jesus prays all night before appointing the twelve for their special leadership roles (6:12-13).

Jesus prays on the occasion of Peter's confession that Jesus is Messiah (9:18-20). The teaching that follows, about the Son of Man's anticipated suffering, suggests that the nature of Jesus' messianic mission is at issue: will he remain true to God's call or yield to Satan's subversion of that call?

Jesus prays at his transfiguration, when “the appearance of his face changed” (9:28-29). As at his baptism, a voice from heaven affirms his divine sonship and beckons the inner circle of three disciples to “listen to him” (9:35; echoing Deut. 18:15).

Jesus’ prayer at “a certain place” elicits from a disciple the request that Jesus teach his followers to pray.

Jesus then provides a pattern in what we know as the Lord’s Prayer. This teaching is linked to a parable in which Jesus promises that God will give the best gift, the Holy Spirit, when we persistently ask (11:1-13).

Jesus further instructs his disciples on the importance of persisting in prayer, by telling a parable about a widow and an unjust judge (18:1-8).

Jesus prays for Simon Peter, for protection and deliverance from Satan’s power: “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail” (22:31-32).

Jesus prays in Gethsemane—both for himself and for his disciples—to counter the temptation to turn to violence. He prays that he will stay faithful and that his disciples will not resort to fighting evil with evil (22:39-46).

These nine texts specifically say that Jesus prayed, but they give little content. Other texts consist of prayers, such as the notable prayer in Luke 10:21-22 (parallel in Matt. 11:25-27):

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Further, Mary’s Magnificat, Zechariah’s Benedictus, and Simeon’s Nunc Dimittis (in Luke 1–2) are forms of prayer: Mary’s

hymn of praise echoes Hannah's in 1 Samuel 2; Zechariah's "Blessed be ..." draws on lines from Psalms 105 and 106; and Simeon's song reflects lines from Isaiah 40:5; 42:6; 52:10. It is fair to say that prayer and praise—along with salvation, joy, and peace—form the ethos of Luke, and of Acts as well.²

Two of Jesus' three sayings from the cross in Luke are prayers. The first, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34), is unique to Luke, and it models fidelity to God amid martyrdom (Stephen follows Jesus' example; see Acts 7:60). The other prayer from the cross, "Father, into your hands I

Prayer was essential to Jesus' spirituality, reflecting his complete dependence on God. This prayer relationship is a constant in John's Gospel; there Jesus often affirms that he can do nothing on his own.

commend my spirit" (23:46), echoes Psalm 31:5, an entire psalm of prayer and praise in the midst of severe distress. Another well-known prayer from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matt. 27:46b; Mark 15:34), similarly recalls Psalm 22, a trust-lament of the dying righteous one.

John's Gospel mentions other occasions on which Jesus prayed, most notably his "high priestly" prayer in chapter 17. Commentators generally agree that this prayer passes through three stages of focus: prayer for his own

glorification (1-8), prayer for his disciples (9-19), and prayer for those who by the disciples' testimony will also come to believe and be Jesus' followers (20-26). Three overarching petitions in this prayer for disciples and believers are for protection from the evil one (14-16), for sanctification in God's truth (17-19), and for unity, that they may be one as Jesus and his Father are one (20-24). This latter portion is about us—those who will have come to believe through the word and witness of the first disciples:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have

loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

Jesus prays that the mutual indwelling that marked his relationship with the Father before the foundation of the world will include his followers, so that believers will be incorporated into this divine indwelling, mediated through Jesus. As Andrew Lincoln puts it:

To believe in Jesus ... means being incorporated into this relationship of oneness and love that exists between Christ and God—that is, to experience the reality of Jesus' prayer: "may they also be in us!" (v. 21). And that relationship implies that believers in Jesus are part of the unique prayer experience between Christ and God, and so are caught up in his intercessory praying and share in it themselves when they pray in Jesus' name.³

Seen in this light, prayer becomes a holy privilege, a renewal of our deepest identity, a participation in our oneness with God and Jesus Christ. Prayer reminds us and assures us about who and whose we are.

Jesus prays that the mutual indwelling that marks his relationship with the Father will include his followers. Seen thus, prayer is a holy privilege, a renewal of our deepest identity, a participation in our oneness with God and Jesus Christ.

Writers on Jesus at prayer summarize the significance of Jesus' prayers variously. Donald Goergen mentions five reasons why Jesus prayed: (1) for self-understanding and acceptance of divinity; (2) to sustain relationship to his heavenly Abba; (3) to maintain right thinking about and relationship to others; (4) to find direction and strength for major decisions; and (5) to pass over into God's life and return to share what he received.⁴

Michael Griffiths and John Koenig identify what and why Jesus instructs us to pray: (1) to praise, bless, thank, worship, glorify, and extol God; (2) to hold neighbors and enemies before God for reconciliation; (3) that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers; (4) for deliverance from temptation and Satanic attack; and (5) for forgiveness and healing.⁵ Also, the Lord's Prayer provides a pattern for prayer, with

regard to scope and specific needs. It begins with three petitions about God: God's name, God's reign, God's will. It continues with four petitions about human material and spiritual needs, and ends with a doxology.

In recent decades many scholars have written about the significance of Jesus' address of God as "Abba" in prayer. The key point is that the Abba address indicates a relationship of honor, love, obedience, and intimacy between Jesus and his Father. Marianne Meye Thompson's discussion of the history of the debate is the best single treatment I am aware of, of this sensitive and important matter.⁶

Prayer in Acts

This rich portrait of Jesus in prayer has analogies in the prayers of the early church as narrated in Acts. Bonnie Thurston notes there are twenty-five instances of prayer in Acts.⁷ Drawing on Stephen Barton's description of the spirituality of Acts,⁸ I provide a summary of the early church's prayer life:

Prayer features regularly in the accounts of the life of the early church (1:14; 2:42; 12:5; 14:23).

The apostles and leaders of the church are depicted as people of prayer (3:1; 6:4; 7:59-60; 8:15; 10:9; 16:25; 20:36).

The coming of the Holy Spirit to empower the church is presented as a response to prayer (2:1-13; 4:31; 8:15).

Each turning point or crisis in the life of the church comes in response to prayer or is negotiated with the help of prayer (1:24-26; 7:59-60; 8:14; 9:11; 10:2, 4, 20; 11:5; 13:2-3; 22:17).

Both women and men engage in prayer (1:14; 12:12; 16:13; 21:5).

Prayer brings deliverance, including physical healing (see 9:40, for example), forgiveness (7:60; 8:22), personal salvation (8:24; 10:2, 30), and release to prisoners (12:12; 16:25-34).

Prayer, thanksgiving, and rejoicing are linked, giving the church a doxological ethos (2:46-47; 13:48; 27:35; 28:15).

The prayer in Acts 4:23-31 reflects the manner and content of the prayer of early church leaders in times of persecution and gratitude for God's deliverance. The prayer draws on portions of Psalm 2. Acts 4:25b-27 echoes and contextualizes Psalm 2:1-2. Referring to Jesus as God's "holy servant" (vv. 27, 30), the prayer borrows from Psalm 2:7, "You are my Son ..."

After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

The scripture-based, situation-facing prayer of Peter and John and their friends resulted in a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit, inspiring them with freedom and courage to speak the word of God boldly. John Koenig's marvelous book, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer: Boldness and Blessing in the Name of Jesus*, breathes this emphasis, inviting us to enter into the boldness of the early church as we experience afresh the Holy Spirit and as we witness in the name of Jesus. The book is a must for pastors.

Given to me by a pastor, it has enriched my spirituality and teaching.

Paul's contribution

Paul's letters contain many prayers and early Christian confessions that function as prayers. The extended "Blessed be ..." paragraph-long sentence in Ephesians 1:3-14 is the Hebrew *berakah* (blessing) form of prayer, and the later part of the chapter is the thanksgiving (*hodayah*) form.¹⁰ Paul's many benedictions—in four of which the "God of peace" blesses—are also prayers.¹¹ The well-known text of Philippians 2:5-11 is a confession, but it can also be prayed. It extols Jesus Christ. Four Pauline prayer-texts are prominent: Philippians 1:9-11; Ephesians 1:16-23; 3:14-21; Colossians 1:9-12.

In these prayers Paul thanks God for the believers' faith. His prayers ask that believers may (1) abound in love and know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge; (2) receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation so they may come to know Christ; (3) have the eyes of their hearts enlightened to know the hope to which Jesus Christ has called them, the riches of his glorious

Paul's prayers contribute to Christian character formation. They are part of Paul's extensive "in Christ" consciousness, and of his explication of this reality as the context for facing every challenge.

inheritance among the saints, and the greatness of his power for those who believe; (4) be filled with all the fullness of God (reflect God's character); (5) be filled with knowledge of God's will to lead lives worthy of and pleasing to the Lord; (6) bear the fruit of new life in Christ, the harvest of righteousness; (7) draw strength from God's glorious power to endure adversity with patience; and (8) joyfully give thanks.

Paul's prayers contribute to Christian character formation. They are part and parcel of Paul's extensive "in Christ" consciousness, and of his explication of this reality as the context for facing every challenge. His prayers are complemented by frequent calls to imitate himself, Christ, or God. All these modes of apostolic appeal foster Christian growth, empowered by Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation. New creation is Paul's leitmotif, and everything else flows from it. Prayers emerge from the new birth (of which Paul's Dam-

ascus road encounter is an example) that transforms being, values, and mission.

Other New Testament portions contribute to this prayer panorama, as *Into God's Presence: Prayers in the New Testament*, edited by Richard Longenecker, attests (see Heb. 5:7-10, for example). In *Covenant of Peace*, I include a service of worship from the book of Revelation.¹² Hymns of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving punctuate this "revelation of Jesus Christ," given to John for his Lord's Day worship. Prayers arise both from the martyrs under the altar of sacrifice (6:9) and from the altar of incense (5:8 and 8:4).¹³

New Testament prayer for today's Christians

For us as for New Testament believers, prayer should be the breath of our being and the source of sustenance for our lives and ministries today. The variety in New Testament prayer challenges us to speak aloud to God out of the context of our experiences and concerns. The Lord's Prayer provides a pattern: we address God as heavenly Abba¹⁴ and implore God that the divine holiness, will, and purpose prevail; we petition for our material (daily bread) and spiritual needs: we seek forgiveness of our sins, salvation from temptation, and deliverance from evil ("the evil one"); and we extol God's kingdom, power, and glory.¹⁵ Yes, "prayer is the Christian's vital breath."¹⁶

Praying the Lord's Prayer with other believers discloses the significance of praying to *our* Father, as William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas stress in *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*. Further, it is our Christian catechism, for we learn "how to be a Christian by learning how to pray as a Christian."¹⁷ Unlike prayers in which we petition God for *our* wants, this prayer "bends our lives to God." "In praying [the Lord's Prayer], our lives are being bent away from their natural inclinations toward God. We are becoming the very holiness, obedience, forgiveness for which we ask in the prayer."¹⁸

In reading reflections by Eastern Mennonite University students on their experiences in Ivory Coast,¹⁹ I noted a recurring emphasis: they learned that prayer was most important to the life and growth of the church; they were impressed and awed at the time their host parents spent in prayer—sometimes praying all

night, and regularly at the start of the day, as well as before and even after meals, in some cases.

In our busy culture's preoccupation with productivity, we find it difficult to set aside time to pray or even to permeate our work with prayer. Yet these very pressures increase our need to seek the way of Jesus, to sustain a breathing relationship with our Abba in heaven. When Professor David Flusser from Hebrew University in Jerusalem visited Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in the 1980s, he sustained a constant (twenty-four–seven) “mumble” over scripture, God, and life. I believe it was a form of prayer. Mine and yours will probably take a different form from his. But finding our identity in the Lord's Prayer and asking for the Holy Spirit who prays for us when we don't know how to pray (Rom. 8:26), let us by all means in Jesus' name pray.

Notes

¹ I learned this information in a July 2006 conversation with Larry Hurtado.

² For these emphases in Luke, see Willard M. Swartley, “Luke: Gospel of Joy, Salvation, Peace, and Praise,” in *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 121–51. Unfortunately, I did not include prayer in the title of the chapter; had I written the present article three years ago, that chapter subtitle would likely be “Joy and Salvation, Peace and Justice, Prayer and Praise.”

³ Andrew T. Lincoln, “God's Name, Jesus' Name, and Prayer in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 171.

⁴ Donald J. Goergen, *The Mission and Ministry of Jesus* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1986), 125.

⁵ Michael Griffiths, *The Example of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 167–74; and John Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer: Boldness and Blessing in the Name of Jesus* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 66–113.

⁶ Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 1–34.

⁷ Bonnie Thurston, *Spiritual Life in the Early Church: The Witness of Acts and Ephesians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 56.

⁸ Stephen C. Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 90–91.

⁹ The Septuagint uses *pais* to translate “son” (*bn*) in Psalm 2:7, and here (and in chapter 3) in Acts, *pais* is used and translated as “servant.” The Greek *pais* means either “son, child” (KJV) or “servant” (NRSV).

¹⁰ For the different forms of prayer in Hebrew scripture and Jewish liturgy, see Paul F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church: A Study in the Origin and Early Development of the Divine Office* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 12–17. For listing and frequency of various Greek words for prayer in the New Testament, see I. Howard Marshall, “Jesus, Example and Teacher of Prayer in the Synoptic Gospels,” in *Into God's Presence*, ed. Longenecker, 113.

¹¹ For these texts and discussion, see Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, 209–11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 345–55.

¹³ For explication of the significance of this double prayer ascent, see Richard Bauckham, “Prayer in the Book of Revelation,” in *Into God’s Presence*, ed. Longenecker, 252–71, esp. the diagram on 271.

¹⁴ What a father did in first-century Jewish culture included aspects of both maternal and paternal roles in our culture. Thus in the contextualization process, *Abba* denotes heavenly parent. In addressing God as *Abba*, we should not fall victim to our projections of bad—or even good—parental experience, but name the divine parental person (and character) that provides a model and a norm for human parenting. For the problematic dimension of this view, see Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, chapter 14.

¹⁵ Arthur Paul Boers, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray: A New Look at the Lord’s Prayer* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 21–22. Boers’s exposition is well suited to small group study.

¹⁶ From the hymn text “Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire,” by Stephanie Martin (1990); no. 572 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

¹⁷ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, with Scott C. Saye, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18, 110.

¹⁹ In “What I Learned from the African Church: Twenty-Two Students Reflect on a Life-Changing Experience,” *Missio Dei* 11, ed. James R. Krabill (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2006).

About the author

Willard M. Swartley is Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. His most recent book is *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

Treasure in plain sight

Prayer in John Calvin's theology

Barry Murr

In my childhood home, daily life was punctuated with prayer. Prayer at mealtime was no mere thanksgiving for our food but, it seems to me in retrospect, covered every conceivable biblical and theological topic. Prayer at bedtime had special importance, because one could never be sure what would happen during the hours of sleep. The night might even bring death, so everything had to be made right with God. My prayer became mechanistic, legalistic, and—like so much of my early Christian life—motivated by fear and duty. Prayer was something you were to do, needed to do, and did.

Later, when I had been professionally trained for ministry and was armed with theological degrees, ordained, and prepared to teach and preach, I was reasonably sure I understood how this prayer thing was supposed to work, but occasionally something cropped up that made me wonder. One day a parishioner asked me to visit her husband, a patient in the local hospital who was scheduled for surgery the next day. I stood by the man's bedside making small talk, which usually comes easy for me. But this man was a tough customer. He didn't converse, and he let me know that he didn't want me in his room. After a long five minutes, I decided to bow out by using the standard ministerial exiting tool. I remember reaching for his hand and asking perfunctorily if it would be OK if I offered a prayer. With an emphatic "Absolutely not! I don't believe in that stuff!" he jerked his hand away. I awkwardly made my departure, feeling angry, confused, and inadequate. How dare he reject my good intentions and refuse something as simple and helpful as prayer?

Prayer is a treasure not limited to the few lucky enough to have a secret map disclosing its location. Instead, according to Calvin, prayer is a treasure revealed in love by the grace of a benevolent God.

Eventually I accepted a call to a church in upstate New York. Soon after I arrived, I was informed that I was expected to pray with the high school football team on Friday evening. Just before I refused the invitation, I told the coaches I wasn't sure which team I should ask God to favor. They didn't appreciate my humor and probably missed the theological nuance.

Theology informs practice

Most Christians agree that prayer is an integral part of spiritual life, but so many misconceptions surround prayer that separating an appropriate practice from these distortions is no simple matter. Somehow it all gets muddled in ways that may make us uncomfortable, or may make us so comfortable that we no longer care to differentiate a worthy discipline of prayer from the misunderstandings. When prayer is associated with and even defined by its ritual use in our sporting events, graduation ceremonies, legislative sessions, and other societal events, it becomes a self-serving practice, directed by us to God and legitimizing our civic observances by lending them a religious aura. I have no wish to propose a laundry list detailing what is appropriate or inappropriate for prayer. But I do question the validity of cursory and perhaps sentimental prayer that invokes God's blessing on whatever we want to do.

The misconceptions are evident when our petitions suggest that God must provide whatever we think we need at the moment, or that we deserve divine blessing because we are American Christians¹—Mennonites, Presbyterians, Baptists, nice people, the good guys—so God will automatically grant us a win in football, success in a business venture, or victory in whatever cause we favor.

Although my childhood and youth were spent in United Methodist circles, I am now a member of the Presbyterian church. John Calvin, who bequeathed to the Reformed tradition its theological character and confessional orientation, would have embraced the notion that all should be done “decently and in order.” Calvin is known primarily through his monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. A glance at this carefully crafted work leaves little doubt that Calvin was concerned with order and decency. But if one invests a bit more time in reading and reflecting

on it, one begins to see the ardor and pastoral passion in the *Institutes*. More than seventy pages of this theological treatise are devoted to the topic of prayer, under the rubric, “Prayer, which is the chief exercise of faith, and by which we daily receive God’s benefits.” Take a moment to savor these words from the first part of the section on prayer:

But after we have been instructed by faith to recognize that whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide [cf. Col. 1:19, John 1:16] so that we may all draw from it as an overflowing spring, it remains for us to seek in him, and in prayer to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him. Otherwise, to know God as the master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of him, and still not go to him and not ask of him—this would be of as little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him.”²

Prayer is a treasure not limited to the few lucky enough to have a secret map disclosing its location. Instead, according to Calvin, prayer is a treasure revealed in love by the grace of a benevolent God.

The majesty and praise of God

When we have recognized the worth of prayer, our prayer language may emerge naturally, but a sound theological framework can inform the ways we express ourselves in prayer. In his introduction to Reformed theology and practice, John Leith describes the tradition’s ethos. His outline begins with “The Majesty and the Praise of God.”³ Because God is sovereign, holy, and majestic, prayer is to be undertaken with reverence and adoration. God created the world and everything in it and beckons us into the awe-inspiring presence of the divine. Approaching this powerful, all-knowing, holy God can inspire trepidation: What will I say? What will I do?

Desperate pleas—Help me, God! Come to my rescue!—may convey strong emotion and be heartfelt. And there is comfort in

knowing that our entreaties do not go unheard. But we do well to ask ourselves if we have let our prayers regress to the level of crude appeal, at the expense of an appropriate gratitude and reverence. Do we neglect adoration and praise of the God who is sovereign, holy, and majestic?

We scramble through life, rushing from one thing to the next, speaking in the clipped and pragmatic language of our computer age. The media is saturated with sound bites and thirty-second commercials aired at a volume that threatens to make politeness passé. Can you remember the last time you showered someone with words of adoration or respect? When someone offered you authentic praise or a thank-you that was more than a reflexive response? Marriage counselors often advise couples to start the day with a warm touch or a few words of appreciation. Kevin

**Desperate pleas
may be heartfelt.
And there is comfort
in knowing that our
entreaties do not go
unheard. But do we
let our prayers
regress to the level
of crude appeal, at
the expense of an
appropriate grati-
tude and reverence?**

Anderson, a clinical psychologist, marriage therapist, and spiritual director, goes so far as to suggest a slight bow of respect to the other before one takes up one's cup of coffee and morning newspaper. Respect, adoration, and appreciation, when offered humbly to the other, sustain our human relationships; how much more fitting are these gestures in our approach to the Almighty!

Prayer that begins with adoration and reverence turns our focus on God, and focus on God moves us to empty our minds and hearts of clutter, to clear out the mundane.

For Calvin, to mix the sacred and the profane is to abuse the great kindness that God extends in inviting us to pray. Intimate conversation with God not only warrants one's full attention but also means taking care to begin with God.

All too often, conversations between people become one-sided, dominated by the more outgoing and verbal partner, whose agenda seems to be all that needs discussion. We have all been on the receiving end of such conversations and, if we would admit it, have also been guilty of inflicting them on others. Yet they are rare friends who give us the gift of their full attention, who sincerely want to hear all about what we are doing, reading, feeling, needing. They are truly interested, and they listen.

In a healthy prayer life, as the Reformed tradition conceives of it, God is such a listener, even a great shoulder to cry on. However, God also commands respect and reverence, and we ought to use care in speaking to God. Thanksgiving and appreciation for who God is and what God does are starting points that reflect a theology that is ordered correctly. If our theology begins with God, our prayer should follow suit. This order requires a certain discipline, a discipline important to the sixteenth-century Reformers.

Many years ago, Malcolm Boyd, Episcopal priest and activist, wrote a book of prayers that bore the title *Are You Running with*

If our theology begins with God, our prayer should follow suit. This order requires a certain discipline, a discipline important to the sixteenth-century Reformers.

Me, Jesus? As a young, busy pastor struggling to find time for prayer and meditation, I got the sense that I could keep running, pushing, working, doing, and if Jesus was having trouble keeping up, that was Jesus' problem, not mine. At times I still expect God to run with me. But Calvin's *Institutes* reminds me once again that a good prayer life means taking time to be quiet despite my inclination to babble on and on. Of course God can keep

up with us; the more important question is, can we slow down long enough to know God is there, to recognize God and acknowledge God's presence? Perhaps we need to follow the advice of marriage counselors in our relationship with God. Is setting aside time for prayer, in some disciplined way, as important as our other rituals—the morning paper, the stop at the coffee shop, the afternoon run, or the evening television show?

Petition as opportunity and responsibility

Having begun with adoration and praise of God, we turn to Calvin's other component of prayer, petition. We come before God only because God has first moved toward us, and with the realization that we stand in the shadow of the Holy One through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through Christ's sacrifice, we have been forgiven and have hope, and now we can share our needs with God. If, after thanking God, we fail to offer our concerns, we have neglected Christ's invitation to "come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

In the liturgy for Reformed worship, after prayer of adoration, prayer of confession, and prayer for illumination come the prayers of the people. In these prayers the needs of the world and the needs of the gathered community are held up before the God of love and grace. In the *Presbyterian Book of Common Worship*, the commentary on these prayers reminds us that the community of faith has both the opportunity and the responsibility to pray for the needs of others.

In response to the word, prayers are offered. In these prayers, we acknowledge God's presence in the world and in daily life....

Across the ages the church in its worship has prayed for the church universal, the world, all in authority, and those in distress or need. At no other time in its worship is the community of faith more conscious of the needs of the life of the world.

We pray for the world because God loves it. God created the world and cares for it. God sent Jesus, who died for it.... To abide in God's love is to share God's concern for the world. Our prayers should therefore be as wide as God's love and as specific as God's tender compassion for the least ones among us.⁴

Prayer, especially in common worship, can become an opportunity for theological discourses, while concerns for the world and for self trail behind or are absent. As Calvin reminds us, we ought never forget that we come to prayer as sinners in need of grace, so after confessing our sins and being assured of pardon, the community of faith can offer our concerns to the God who already knows what lies within our hearts. Naming our concerns aloud is difficult for Presbyterians, and perhaps for others. Keeping a private prayer journal or a congregational prayer list may be a way to remind us of the needs of others as we pray in public or private. This discipline is so simple, yet it is a powerful tool in helping us remember the needs of the community and the world. Theologian Karl Barth has reminded us that one good way to preach is with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other; perhaps we should sometimes pray in this way, too.

“An anatomy of all the parts of the soul”

Many years ago, a member of the congregation I was serving gave me some wonderful advice: If I wanted to read something beautiful about prayer, I should go to the author's preface to Calvin's commentary on the Psalms. Those words still stand for me as a reminder not only of the importance of the Psalms for the sixteenth-century Reformers but also of how the Psalter continues to provide good models for prayer for twenty-first-century believers: “I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, ‘An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul,’ for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.”⁵

John Calvin is sometimes characterized as a Reformer preoccupied more with dogma, law, and the doctrine of predestination

**If, after thanking
God, we fail to offer
our concerns, we
have neglected
Christ's invitation to
“come to me, all
you that are weary
and are carrying
heavy burdens, and I
will give you rest.”**

than with prayer, forgiveness, and the gospel. Perhaps he will never be accused of being warm and fuzzy, but his rules of prayer were significant in the *Institutes* and in his pastoral work. His reference to the Psalter as a mirror of the soul reminds us that nothing is too personal or emotional to bring to God. But while the psalms express anger, hurt, disappointment, and depression, they are also reminders of the majesty and holiness of Almighty God. As the psalms illustrate,

prayer is a wonderful combination of adoring God, thanking God, and crying out to God from the depth of one's soul. The latter can even manifest itself in expressing anger at or to God.

Some people understand prayer in ways defined by their tradition. Others pray without benefit of a tradition, in times of crisis and especially at defining moments of life. People sometimes pray the Lord's Prayer with reverent attention and at other times out of obligation or pressure to conform. God will be the final judge of the prayers of the people. Those of us who write journal articles will, at best, offer a few theological reflections on prayer so that Christians may continue to learn how to pray in behalf of

ourselves, our communities of faith, and the global community. At a time when the world seems to trivialize many things, perhaps a few centuries-old rules can still bring us some benefit.

John Calvin is one among many who can instruct us about prayer and the Christian life. Perhaps my favorite of all Calvin's teachings (borrowed from Cyprian of Carthage) is his comparison of the church to a loving, nurturing, nursing mother: "There is no

If we clear away our misconceptions, if we begin our theology with God and open our prayer with adoration and praise, our needs and our petitions will find their rightful place.

other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her guidance."⁶

"Lord, teach us to pray," the disciples said to Jesus. His response was a relatively short and simple prayer. Yet within this prayer, we find a model for our prayer. Calvin includes in his treatment of prayer in the *Institutes* a sustained commentary on the petitions of the Lord's Prayer.⁷ For as much as Calvin spoke

out against books of common prayer, he was concerned that prayer, and public prayer in particular, be theologically sound and practiced with some sense of order.

But even for Calvin, order and discipline exist to serve ardor. Humanity's reason for being, the main purpose of our life, according to a classic Reformed catechism rooted in Calvin's theology, is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.⁸ If we clear away our misconceptions and our sense that it's all about us, if we begin our theology with God and open our prayer with adoration and praise, our needs and our petitions will find their rightful place, and we will discover in plain sight the treasure that is prayer.

Notes

¹ I speak out of my own national context; Canadian and other readers will need to translate to theirs.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, H. P. Van Dusen; trans. F. L. Battles, J. Baillie; Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.20.1.

³ Chapter 3 in *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, by John H. Leith (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 67–85.

⁴ *Book of Common Worship*, prepared by the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 40.

⁵John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 4, *Joshua, Psalms 1–35*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 36.

⁶Christopher Elwood, *Calvin for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 102.

⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.34–49.

⁸Article 1, Westminster Shorter Catechism. Printed in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA*, part 1, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 175; available online at <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/boc.pdf>.

About the author

Barry Murr is Pastor of Glendale Presbyterian Church, Toledo, Ohio, and a teacher of Reformed theology and pastoral care in the Maumee Valley Presbyterian Lay Pastor Program.

Holy ground, shaky ground, common ground

Public prayer in rhetorical perspective

Juanita Weaver

The worship leader was praying in a loud voice. Five-year-old Jenny whispered, “Mommy, if he was closer to God, he wouldn’t have to holler, would he?” This child’s naïve question connects with more sophisticated criticisms of our worship prayers. While her comment focuses on the relationship between the leader and

Anyone can engage in the private act of talking and listening to God. But not everyone offers effective public prayers, focused not only on listening to the mind of God but also on group communication.

God, a more common complaint about public prayer speaks to a lack of connection between the leader and the human listeners. When listeners say that a prayer wasn’t good, they are usually pointing to a communication gap. The first time I saw a reproduction of Michelangelo’s painting of the creation of Adam, I was drawn to the slight gap between the finger of God reaching down, and the human finger reaching up. I wanted those fingers to touch! We want our prayer to make that connection. We don’t speak just to hear

our own voices but also to connect with our audience. And for public prayer, our listeners are both divine and human.

Common ground

Anyone can pray. Anyone can engage in the private and personal act of talking and listening to God. But not everyone offers effective public prayers. Such prayers are focused not only on listening to the mind of God but also on group communication. The role of the leader is to express the group’s mind to God. Effective public prayers empower the group by conveying its collective emotions and thoughts to God, an act that in turn intensifies the participants’ private desires into actions.

Imagine the leader as the one who is charged with connecting the hands of the group with the hand of God, through the vehicle

of public prayer. One way of knowing that such prayer has achieved its aim is this kind of response from participants: “That prayer really moved me.” The rhetorical concept of common ground addresses the importance of making this connection. Our goal when leading public prayer should be to select words that will enable our listeners to understand the message we want to communicate to them. When the speaker selects words to say for a group, she does so with the intention of accurately interpreting the meaning listeners will assign to her words. The meaning listeners give to those words is derived from their interpretation of the experience. When the speaker’s intended meaning and the listeners’ interpreted meaning are in agreement, a powerful connection is established between speaker and listeners and God.

Holy ground

I want to acknowledge the discomfort some have about being critical of public prayer. Perhaps such people understand any conversation with God as being like God’s conversation with Moses—as taking place on holy ground. God is holy, God’s message is holy, and therefore God’s human messenger becomes holy in the moment of prayer. The humble, obedient leader simply becomes the vehicle to carry the words of God directly to the hearts of the listeners.

No wonder that it would seem inappropriate to evaluate prayer so conceived; in this view, the leader is simply speaking God’s mind to the people. Given these assumptions, leaders would have no reason to learn to pray better, because that process would entail putting human words in place of God’s, inserting the human between God’s words addressed directly to the group. In this view, attention to and analysis of corporate prayers seems to reduce them to human constructs void of holy ground, so much rhetorical method and verbal technique.

Another objection I’ve heard states that it is God who ultimately decides if our worship is pleasing, so leaders should be concerned about what God thinks rather than about what human listeners want. If God’s judgment is our only criterion for deciding what is good, how will we know if our prayers are good?

Speaking as one trained in rhetoric, I find it more useful to shift our focus from offering good prayers to offering effective

prayers. I do not wish to imply that *good* and *effective* are mutually exclusive values, but I want to focus on pragmatic considerations. In public prayers the relationship between leader and human audience is often undervalued, overlooked, or assumed. Yet, when leaders agree to lead public prayers, they take on the responsibility of representing the particular group. In reality, listeners do play a major role in determining the effectiveness of communal prayers, and their responses therefore deserve our attention.

Shaky ground

Making this rhetorical shift in focus toward connecting with the human audience for public prayer may feel like stepping on shaky ground. It's true that history shows this ground to be constantly shifting, and some believe the soil beneath us has been undermined to the extent that we risk collapsing into chaos, where no connections can be made. Because our society lacks social, religious, political, and moral cohesion, keeping our balance on such ground is a daily struggle, with many stresses and strains.

Living well in such a world will entail recognizing our common humanity and our need to converse with God. We want to know

When we value practical wisdom, when our understanding is shaped by human experience, when we are open to mutual participation, we also open ourselves to accept some things that challenge our traditional understandings.

how to ask questions and hear God's replies. Some argue that a dialogical approach to public prayers puts the community on shaky ground. But when we genuinely value the role of practical wisdom, when our understanding is shaped by human experience and activity, when we are open to mutual participation, we also open ourselves to accept some things that challenge our traditional understandings.

Religious audiences have been called "elite audiences," because religious people tend to believe they have access to transcendent and infallible knowledge, and that (at least sometimes) they possess supernatural

revelation or mystical knowledge that they believe puts them on solid ground. Mennonite history and traditions also have an impact on our current understandings and situations. Even though our sense of separation from our society may locate us on more stable ground, we shouldn't confuse being an elite audience with

being perfect or above benefiting from guidance from rhetoric. Elite audiences still require an understanding of their need to communicate and to forge connections between their daily and their spiritual concerns.

Finding common ground within holy ground and shaky ground

If we understand God as an outside force directing the chaos in our experience, it is difficult to make the connection. In a rhetorical sense, as believers, we come together in worship to give meaning to our experiences through speaking with God and one another, in scripture, song, prayer, and proclamation. Worship is the place where we reconnect with God and one another, where we find common ground.

“Shared meaning,” “common ground,” and “fusion of horizons” are rhetorical expressions used to describe various aspects of this connection. The connection is never completely under the control of any conversational partner, nor is a complete connection possible, but the worship leader’s role in public prayer is to help the worshipping congregation find common ground within holy ground and shaky ground. As a result of such prayers, God acts and we act.

Ineffective prayers sometimes fail to accomplish their goal of conveying shared meaning not because they were bad but because the speaker simply didn’t understand the complex role the congregation plays in shaping effective prayers. Often the speaker is unaware of—and therefore does not avail himself of—rhetoric’s systematic approach to reaching the goal of common ground.

Audience analysis

The discipline of rhetoric uses audience analysis as a first step in shaping public communication. Audience analysis is a formal method of taking the roll, of finding out who is present for worship. Empty rhetoric or pandering to the gathered congregation is not the goal of audience analysis. In public prayer, we don’t want to change the message so it flatters the human listeners and caters to their desires; we want to shape the means of presenting the message so it is more easily understood by the audience.

Audience analysis involves elements of both psychology and sociology. Two types of audience analysis that are particularly

helpful in this process are demographic and situational analysis. Demographic analysis considers factors such as the age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic composition of the group of listeners. Some congregations provide a congregational profile to aid worship leaders in their preparation. Using this profile helps worship leaders examine what the particular people in this congregation are reading, watching, doing, eating, enjoying, working at, worrying about, listening to. Knowing something about these

The worship leader's role in public prayer is to help the worshipping congregation find common ground within holy ground and shaky ground. As a result of such prayers, God acts and we act.

aspects of their group's experience can help leaders shape appropriate prayers.

Paying attention to these elements will influence language choices and delivery. What will communicate: a prayer that begins, "Our Father, who art in heaven," or the prayer I heard in a worship service a few months ago, which opened with "Yo God—you up there"? Each of these two forms of address appears appropriate to some listeners and completely inappropriate or even ridicu-

lous to others. What will connect with the experience of these particular listeners? Are they used to loud, long prayers or soft, short prayers? Do they expect prayer that stirs their hearts or prayer that calls them to correct behavior?

Situational analysis includes attention to expectations about formality, time of day, size of audience, attitudes toward the speaker, and the group's concerns related to the worship theme. A common complaint about many public prayers is that they are too long. The expression "praying around the world" identifies an impulse to string out our prayers to great length, when we may in fact have little to say, because we have failed to analyze or to fine-tune our analysis to the group and situation.

Of course there are aspects of our audience that we cannot analyze or anticipate, so we simply have to adapt. That said, as we seek to shape effective public prayers, we could usually consider much more than we do.

Public prayer as playful art

Public prayer is also a genre of artistic discourse, marked by a distinctive style, form, and content. Our intention in praying is

not to regulate human behavior but to dream of breakthroughs rather than breakdowns. As Mennonites embrace the visual arts and honor the ways artistic creation can take us out of our ordinary worlds and move us to new possibilities, we can also call on our verbal artists to create connections in playful, inviting ways through public prayers.

We probably don't think of our public prayer time as a trip to the playground, and we may regard playgrounds as childish places, not meant for adults. But remember these words of Jesus: "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). The ability of children to be honest and humble is an innocence that we can reclaim in our prayers. Prayer as a linguistic art form helps us break free from our cerebral imprisonment and shed our pretenses.

Rhetorical studies focus on language as the creative force in public prayer, where words well spoken have power to change our world. Words are symbols that enable us to share our experiences and shape our perceptions and actions. Martin Luther King Jr. was known for his speeches, his words that created vivid word pictures that resonated in listeners' hearts and spirits. Public prayer needs to balance elegance with relevance, so it is as applicable and accessible as possible to our listeners. Our prayer words should be simple and specific. People have characterized Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as a communal prayer that changed a nation. It contains 271 words; 251 are words of one or two syllables. Mark Twain understood the power of simple and direct language when he said that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightening and a lightening bug.

Sometimes we sing our prayers. Poets and musicians have given every word and every note of our hymns careful thought and consideration. What musician would simply look at a piece or hum it in his head and never actually sing it out loud before sharing it? Certainly some occasions call for impromptu prayers in public. Called on to pray in such times, most of us feel anxiety about being put on the spot. It's not easy, under the circumstances, to stay sharply focused and be concise. For most of us, offering impromptu public prayers elicits not our best words but a case of nerves. And the resulting prayer may display a relaxed

familiarity more appropriate to a private conversation with God than a public gathering.

If we give care to crafting words but do not practice speaking them aloud, we do something akin to quilting a quilt and leaving the edges unbound, or painting a picture and leaving the canvas unframed. Many a powerful prayer has been ruined by poor delivery. The notion that not needing to practice our prayers is a sign of spiritual maturity seems like nonsense to me. For any important conversation with another person we would rehearse our words in advance; not to do so with public prayer is a manifestation of human ignorance or arrogance.

For the most part, worship services are planned in advance, and worship leaders have enough time to prepare and practice. Many write out their prayers and proceed to deliver them from a manuscript. Unfortunately the message of many written prayers is lost in ineffective delivery, because they weren't polished by practice, aloud. "Too fast" and "too monotone" and "unnatural tone" and "annoyingly loud" are common complaints about such prayers. Ultimately, we strive for a sense of rehearsed spontaneity that connects with listeners.

Conclusion

Public dialogue with God is a rhetorical activity that deserves our attention. Considering public prayer as a genre of rhetoric helps us understand it as a speech act that requires focus on common ground. Two rhetorical elements can fuse holy ground and shaky ground into common ground that invites listeners to God's playground of possibilities. These are the systematic science of audience analysis and the art of language choice and delivery. By using audience analysis and choosing appropriate language, we can craft public prayers that can be used by the Spirit to shape listeners' thoughts and actions and shift the gathered congregation's patterns of thinking from separation to solidarity, from chaos to cohesion. The next time we say, "Let us pray," may our listeners sense that we are giving voice before God to their deepest desires.

About the author

Juanita Weaver is an alumna of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, now teaching communication at Villanova University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

God's unconditional love, Billy Joel, and the healing power of centering prayer

Jay Freel Landry

Speaking like a mother gathering her children, the Lord God poetically comforts the people of Israel in Babylonian exile. Through the prophet Isaiah, God announces a love for the people that is without qualification, and promises to bring them back home, back to God:

*But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob,
and formed you, O Israel:
Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name: you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
in the rivers you shall not drown.
When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned;
the flames shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in return for you.
Because you are precious in my eyes
and glorious, and because I love you,
I give men in return for you
and peoples in exchange for your life.
(Isa. 43:1-5; New American Bible).*

For years, I have read this passage and experienced solace in these words of assurance that God speaks through Isaiah: You are mine; I love you. This love song from our creator to Israel and to all peoples expresses a deep divine tenderness that stirs up hope in the beloved.

At times I have been able to embrace the freedom this passage invites. At other times, I have moved away from that freedom toward seeking salvation by my own efforts; into my being creeps that idea that I have to make myself worthy of being loved by God. In fact, it was not until Kathleen Chesto led our parish mission in February 2006

that I realized how much I have vacillated between trusting God's unconditional love for me and trying vainly to impress God with my virtue and my accomplishments.

What began to remove my blinders? In her three mission talks in our parish, author, retreat leader, and woman of faith Kathy Chesto used phrases from Isaiah and from the Billy Joel song "Just the Way You Are."¹ Billy Joel probably wrote this song about someone he loved deeply. But as art does, the song has a life of its own. For me, as Chesto used it in our parish mission, the song became a wonderful restatement of God's love for Israel and all humanity as described in Isaiah 43:1-5. God's Spirit used Billy Joel's words to begin to recreate me.

As Chesto recited, "Don't go changing, to try and please me; ... I'll take you just the way you are," and then quoted phrases from Isaiah 43:1-5, the realization dawned on me that I had spent most of my Christian life trying to change myself into someone whom God would find pleasing—and almost always feeling that I didn't measure up. Then Chesto said, "What will it take till you believe in me / The way that I believe in you?" and I thought, Oh my gosh! I have spent so much energy, prayer, and anxiety trying to get God to love me by making myself worthy—when all the time, like the father of the prodigal son, God has been standing on the porch, waiting for me to turn toward home to receive and celebrate this love relationship.

Chesto then quoted the line "I said I love you and that's forever / And this I promise from the heart / I could not love you any better / I love you just the way you are." Caught up in the power of the conviction in her voice, I was overwhelmed by God's unconditional love. In my heart I began to be freed of the temptation to try to earn God's love, and then joy flooded in, with the assurance that God does love me. This promise is forever. The psalmist's song welled up in me: "Bless the LORD, O my soul! Let all that is within me bless God's holy name!" (Ps. 103:1).

The more Chesto recited the lines from Isaiah and Billy Joel, the more my sense of unworthiness before God melted away. As she talked, my tears flowed and my blinders started to fall. I began to sing "Just the Way You Are," imagining that God was singing it to me. Afterward, in odd moments I would be overcome with joy as God's love began to radiate within me. I would sometimes pray

aloud, wherever I was. Folks in the grocery checkout lines sometimes gave me funny looks, but I just kept praying. People would ask why I was so full of joy, and I would tell them. Some seemed to wonder, what are you on?

During and after our parish mission, my false belief that salvation is something that I must earn began to diminish. I began to sense God's offer of salvation as utterly gratuitous. At times I knew, with every ounce of my being, that all I had to do was accept this gift of love and forgiveness. As this healing happened, I found myself able to forgive more easily. Moreover, when tempted to confess the sins of other people (gossip), I found it relatively easy to turn away from this evil. Further, I began to understand that only God can heal the human heart. As Saint Teresa of Ávila was fond of saying, "*Sólo Dios basta*" (only God satisfies).

The realization dawned on me that I had spent most of my Christian life trying to change myself into someone whom God would find pleasing—and almost always feeling that I didn't measure up.

After the parish mission, as Lent approached, I asked myself what I would give up. The answer came easily: I would give up rushing through the day, skipping prayer, doing too much, being impatient, trying to prove others wrong so that I could be right, negativity, and my multi-tasking—which often puts things before people. I felt God calling me to give up these forms of sin that threaten to obscure my awareness of God's

offer of unconditional love. The habit of acting as though it is all up to me dies hard. I am still tempted to believe that if I work really hard in the vocations to which God has called me, as husband, father, and pastoral associate, I might have a shot at salvation.

As I was letting go of some things in Lent, I needed to embrace (or be embraced by) others: grace, seeing God in all things and all people, waiting on the Lord, stopping to smell the flowers, looking at people when I speak with them (my perpetual multi-tasking tends to pull me into doing two to three other things as I speak to someone on the phone or in person; at such times, I do not see as God sees). Most of all, I decided that I needed and wanted to go out of my way to play, to celebrate this love of God with my wife, children, and all those I encountered. By *play*, I mean relishing

Jesus' gift of abundant life (John 10:10) to us right now, right here—a eucharistic approach to life, lived in thanksgiving to God for everything.

How does the experience I have recounted connect with the practice of centering prayer? Little did I know that God had already been leading me toward these moments of joy by exposing me to centering prayer. This approach to prayer had already begun to change me, simply by asking me to sit in the presence of God's love. My healing had already begun through this prayer practice, in which my anxiety lessened and my trust in God deepened. Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk, calls centering prayer "divine therapy": I just sit in the presence of God and am enveloped by divine love. How? By breathing in a sacred word for God and breathing it out, praying the Jesus prayer, or breathing in the divine word and breathing out a virtue or gift in which I want to grow.

My practice of centering prayer has developed over time. When I started, I would set my watch for thirty minutes and breathe in a word for God and then breathe out what I wanted more of: love, peace, joy, faith, hope, wisdom, for example. Frankly, it felt like I was doing all this work, and the result was a breathing marathon. I think I was expecting something to happen. Finally my watch would beep and I would say, "Thank God that's over." But then I would just sit quietly for five or ten minutes more, and breathe. Over time, I realized that it was really in those five or ten minutes after my watch beeped that I was doing centering prayer, just being with God. I quit setting my watch and started just sitting with God.

When I teach centering prayer, people sometimes tell me, "But I am not doing, seeing, or hearing anything." Exactly. That is the goal of this prayer: to do nothing as I am embraced by the divine presence, and to allow myself to be loved as a child is held and loved by a parent. Too often, I had come to prayer as if it were a vending machine: I put something in and expected that God would dispense something. Sometimes prayer does work that way, yet the experience of the saints and mystics—and even my own experience—has taught me that prayer can be so much more.

At times I have turned to God in centering prayer when I felt that I was in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the grip of fear as I

faced the cross, I prayed. What I received during and after this prayer was rarely an answer or a quick fix. Rather, what I received is what I think Jesus may have experienced, heard, and felt in Gethsemane from his Father, the assurance that “I am with you. I love you and you are mine.” My trust in what I cannot see grows, and I walk more by faith and less by sight. I have renewed faith that God is truly with me, no matter what happens.

According to a Gandhian principle of meditation, you become what you meditate on. Eastern Christian traditions teach that we have been created by God to return to God through a process Orthodox Christians call “theosis” or “divinization,” that is, of ultimately becoming one with God through transforming grace. Apophatic or *via negativa* (way of negation) prayer, such as centering prayer and the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of

The goal of centering prayer is to do nothing as I am embraced by the divine presence, and to allow myself to be loved as a child is held and loved by a parent.

God, have mercy on me, a sinner”), is a particular emphasis in the Eastern church, though there are important strands in Christian tradition in the West as well.

As 1 John 3:2 says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, *we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*” Another way to name the experience of centering prayer is as “common

union” or “communion” with God. What is this communion like? Again I quote 1 John: “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (4:16). If God is love, and we remain in God through prayer, we can become this love for God and others. In doing so, we become like God.

In the summer of 2005, Marlene Kropf and I organized a Mennonite-Catholic experience of centering prayer in northern Indiana. We gathered for six periods of prayer, three in Catholic churches and three in Mennonite churches. It was a remarkable experience of the body of Christ Mennonite and Catholic. Through these prayers we shared in Christ’s one body, and perhaps someday we can share one communion, because ecumenism is not an addition to the mission of the gospel but is at its heart. We had a social after each session and encouraged people to chat with

someone from the other tradition. Participants commented: “Why have we waited so long to do this?” “This is wonderful!” “Let’s do more of this.” “I have never met a Mennonite before.” “I have not known many Catholics.”

Many participants were doing centering prayer for the first time. We developed this prayer series out of a set of tapes, “Healing Our Violence through the Journey of Centering Prayer,” by Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who founded the Center for Contemplation and Action, and Thomas Keating. In each session we played or summarized part of one of the tapes, taught a bit about this way of prayer, and then invited the Mennonites, Catholics, and others gathered, to try it for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then we discussed our experience in pairs and in the larger group. Some participants felt closer to God, a deeper trust, a sense of peace; some found in this new (to them) form a kind of prayer that they wanted to enter into again.

Where have these experiences brought me? To the hope and expectation that I will continue to seek communion with God and all people through this divine healing love in prayer. At times, I still find myself vacillating between trying to earn my salvation and knowing that it is an utter gift, to be celebrated and shared. I am thankful to have seen God’s love in Marlene Kropf and many Mennonites who I *know* are my brothers and sisters in Christ. Better yet, they have become friends with whom I journey in prayer and mission toward a fuller realization of God’s reign, in which one day God will be all in all, and all creation will know the fullness of God’s promise of love found in Isaiah: “I have called you by name: you are mine.... I love you.”

Note

¹ Billy Joel, *The Stranger*, 1977; re-released 1998. Search the lyrics for “Just the Way You Are” at http://www.billyjoel.com/frameset_lyrics.html.

About the author

Jay Freel Landry is married to Deb, and they have two daughters, Grace and Mary. Jay is a Pastoral Associate at Little Flower Catholic Church in South Bend, Indiana. He ministers in the areas of adult faith formation, initiation, outreach, and justice ministries.

Too deep for words

Learning about prayer from people with developmental disabilities

Paula Snyder Belousek

My first meetings with Jerry were jarring. This Paul Bunyan of a man, made strong by many hours of farm work, would forcefully place his hand on my head for several seconds and then touch my forehead. I resisted what I experienced as an intrusive gesture, and complained that he was pushing too hard and messing up my hair. Jerry smiled indulgently at my protests and continued to insist on completing this ritual each time we met.

After several unsettling encounters, it became clear to me that Jerry's intention is not to rearrange my hair but to give me a blessing. Placing those powerful, well-worn hands on my head and forming the sign of the cross on my forehead, he wordlessly prays God's benediction on me. In Jerry's iron grip I identify with Jacob

Jerry and many other friends with developmental disabilities have been important spiritual mentors for me, expanding my understanding of prayer and life shared in Christian community.

wrestling with God. I sense that God's love rests upon me and is unwilling to let me go. Like Jacob, I cannot wriggle out of the grasp of this bearer of blessing; instead I eagerly anticipate receiving this gift of grace through Jerry's hands whenever we meet.

Jerry has a developmental disability.¹ He will probably never write a book about prayer, nor is he able to clearly articulate what his prayer life means to him. Nonetheless, Jerry and many other friends with developmental disabilities have been important

spiritual mentors for me, expanding my understanding of prayer and life shared in Christian community.

In *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson writes that the spiritual life is first about God's desire to relate to us. Our relationship with God is always a result of God's initiative toward us. Prayer happens because of the "hidden response to the hidden workings of the Spirit within."² People with developmental disabilities, particu-

larly those with the most severe cognitive disabilities, have much to teach us about the way God takes initiative with us; their experience challenges the assumption that prayer requires certain abilities or levels of intelligence. Instead, each of us is beloved of God; God's imprint is indelibly placed within us, marking us for relationship and communion with God.

The apostle Paul points to this reality when he writes that the Spirit "helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Each person, regardless of other abilities, has a capacity to be in relationship with God and is created for a life of prayer. What follows are some reflections about the gifts of prayer that people with developmental disabilities bring to the community of faith, and some suggestions about ways to assist in deepening and enriching the prayer lives of this population.

Prayer as multifaceted language

Prayer at its most basic is communication with God.³ Often we think about communication—whether with God or between humans—in terms of language-based forms of conversation. But for many people with developmental disabilities, verbal expression may not be the dominant way of communicating. For many, communication happens with few if any words, through utterances or noises, a single spoken word or phrase, sign language or gestures, eye contact, touch, or body movement. In the same way that people with developmental disabilities use diverse modalities in their communication with other people, communication with God may also take a variety of forms. If a life of prayer flows out of God's initiative in the "hidden workings of the Spirit within," then to honor God's movement in the life of a person with a developmental disability is to honor that individual's style of communication.

Laurent is ten years old. He has a severe disability, and his only form of unaided communication is to use his right hand to stroke the face of whoever happens to be sitting beside him—his way of saying "I love you." Laurent's mother writes, "Lately it has been more difficult to go to the chapel with Laurent because he would not lie in my arms and look at the icon of Jesus ... a few feet away. In the end, I realized that Laurent wanted to go up to the icon

and stroke it. And I realized that Jesus ... [was] truly present to him through the wood of the icon. Stroking and loving and praying were all one.”⁴ Prayer aided by icons may be foreign to many in the Anabaptist tradition, but this story makes abundantly

If a life of prayer flows out of God’s initiative, then to honor God’s movement in the life of a person with a developmental disability is to honor that individual’s style of communication.

clear that this tangible image enables Laurent to show his loving response to God’s loving initiative in seeking him.

Prayer in corporate worship sometimes inhibits participation by people with developmental disabilities. In Mennonite settings, prayers are often carefully constructed to include rich images and important theological truths. While it is important to rehearse and enact the reality of who God is and who we are in relationship with God, prayers that rely

exclusively on the spoken word can be barriers to full participation in their worshiping communities by individuals with disabilities.

For people with limited vocabulary and short attention spans, prayers that use complicated syntax and abstract ideas can be difficult to follow. The presence of worshipers with developmental disabilities can give us impetus to expand our ways of praying to include them as well as those whose primary learning styles are visual or movement oriented. We can shape prayers that rely on simple language and short phrases that draw us back to what is essential in our faith and worship. Our prayers can be enriched through use of repeated sung or signed responses, body movement, or visual images that accompany the spoken words. Those of us who tend to worship with our minds may find our hearts and bodies engaged as well.

The use of ritual in prayer

Paul slowly and purposefully recited, “Our Father who art in heaven ...” Many gathered that morning for worship listened with surprise and awe as this shy senior citizen with Down’s syndrome confidently prayed the Lord’s Prayer. Paul has slowed down over the years and often struggles to answer questions people address to him, and he seldom speaks unless prompted. However, the Lord’s Prayer, learned long ago, still lives in his memory and provides structure for his spoken prayers.

Forms of ritual such as recitation of the Lord's Prayer⁵ are particularly effective for praying with many people with developmental disabilities; using familiar prayer patterns allows all of us to anticipate the structure of the prayer and participate freely. Patterned prayer also provides opportunity for one with disabilities to lead others in prayer.

A favorite prayer ritual used by the Faith and Light Communities⁶ in the Washington, DC, area is a repetitive response after someone shares a thanksgiving or intercession. The gathered community responds by singing and signing "Father of Jesus, hear our prayer."⁷ This prayer is prayed with eyes open so all can "hear" petitions offered through sign language, gestures, and eye movements. Those who are easily distracted are called back to prayer each time the repeated phrase returns. Regardless of how unconventional the form of prayer—joyful laughter, a hug offered to one who is grieving, labored speech, acting out a concern—the group responds with the ritual refrain.

One evening during a prayer time of this kind, J. P., an articulate man with Down's syndrome, dramatically walked to the center of the prayer circle and knelt, boldly praying for God's blessing and in turn offering his life in service to God. As I listened, I longed for J. P.'s boldness and courage; I was struggling with my own growing sense of call to pastoral ministry. As he gave voice to the prayer that I was struggling to form, J. P.'s response was a gift not only to God but to me.

Prayers of lament

People with developmental disabilities have many spiritual gifts to offer the church, but we dare not view them as angels. To do so is dehumanizing, and it fails to recognize the reality of the sin, brokenness, and pain that all people, including those with developmental disabilities, experience.

As I have prayed with people with developmental disabilities, I have come to recognize the importance of lament as a form of prayer. Often adults with developmental disabilities have limited social and support networks: many experience cultural marginalization, their paid caregivers come and go, their parents die. In addition to these losses, people may feel grief related to their own limitations or the recognition that they are not likely to experi-

ence significant life-stage events such as marriage, childbirth, and meaningful work. Still, other people often assume that people with developmental disabilities are unaware of painful events or will quickly rebound from their losses.⁸

An important form of pastoral care for people with developmental disabilities is honoring their feelings of sadness, depression, and pain. Instead of using a simplistic theology to try to help others understand their losses, we can create spaces in which they can direct their feelings and questions to God. The Psalms and Lamentations can provide words and images to be spoken or enacted as prayer. We may not always know or clearly understand the source of an individual's pain, but we can offer assurance that God hears their prayers, comprehends, and cares. This affirmation should not be used to avoid the time-consuming work of understanding difficult speech, but it is a reminder that the person's

prayer is not directed to the one providing spiritual care but to God.

Pastoral care for people with developmental disabilities will honor their feelings of sadness, depression, and pain. We can create spaces in which they can direct their feelings and questions to God.

Honoring prayers of lament may also require listening to the prayer behind the prayer. Lane, a long-time member of a congregation I attended, would frequently say during sharing time, "Pray for Daddy." The worship leader often politely acknowledged Lane's request but consistently excluded her petition in the congregational prayer—perhaps because Lane's father had been dead for many years. One Sunday, a sensitive and

astute worship leader heard Lane's request for prayer and said, "You really miss your dad, don't you? Can we pray for you today?" Instead of dismissing Lane's prayer request, the leader responded in a way that communicated to the congregation the validity of Lane's petition and the reality of her pain. This response has enabled others to hear Lane's request for prayer in a new way and to connect her loss with their own ongoing need to grieve.

Our church communities are enriched by the active prayer lives of many people with developmental disabilities. The joy, genuine care, and spontaneity of these friends as they respond to the Spirit's prompting is a gift that can free us to experience God's love and presence in new ways. As we seek to make our congrega-

tions places of welcome and spiritual nurture for people with developmental disabilities, we in turn strengthen and care for the life of prayer of the whole community. “Just as one member suffers, all suffer together ...; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor. 12:26).

Notes

¹I am using *developmental disabilities* to refer to primarily cognitive disabilities that occur before the age of twenty-one; these include mental retardation, autism spectrum disorders, and cerebral palsy.

²Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 31.

³*Ibid.*, 32.

⁴“Deepening Our Spirituality in Faith and Light,” *Faith and Light* booklet, September 1991, 22.

⁵Roy Oswald describes ritual as patterned activities that create and express meaning, often with symbols or gestures. See Roy M. Oswald with Jean Morris Trumbauer, *Transforming Rituals: Daily Practices for Changing Lives* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), 11.

⁶Faith and Light is an ecumenical worship movement present in seventy-seven countries. These communities of faith consist of people with developmental disabilities and their families and friends. For more information visit <http://www.foietlumiere.org/site/english/>.

⁷Dolores Wilson, Office of Persons with Disabilities, [Catholic] Archdiocese of Washington, taught me this form of prayer and a great deal about the spiritual lives of people with developmental disabilities.

⁸For more information about grief and developmental disability, see Charlene Luchterhand and Nancy Murphy, *Helping Adults with Mental Retardation Grieve a Death Loss* (Philadelphia: Accelerated Development, 1998).

About the author

Paula Snyder Belousek is grateful for her friends with developmental disabilities, who first called her to ministry. She is now Associate Pastor of Prairie Street Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Indiana.

Laments—misunderstood, truncated, exiled, silenced

Ron Guengerich

When was the last time you heard a psalm of lament read with passion in Sunday worship? How frequently do you hear one of these psalms of agony, suffering, and deprivation in your congregation's services: every Sunday? once a month? once a year? on Good Friday? only in times of community or national disaster?

Although the psalms of lament are by far the most common genre in the Psalter, they seldom make their appearance in full force in Christian worship services. Why have we exiled these prayers of the soul in agony to a far land? In these prayers we meet

Although the psalms of lament are the most common genre in the psalter, they seldom make their appearance in full force in Christian worship. Why have we exiled these prayers of the soul in agony to a far land?

the raw emotions of disappointment, discouragement, anger, frustration, and pain that are present in our world, in our community, and in our congregation. It is to these prayers that individuals often turn when they face pain, grief, or frustration that renders them speechless and numb. These psalms give voice to a suffering so overwhelming that it seems almost unbearable.

If one were to scrutinize the lectionaries and daily offices in common use, one would find that many of these worship resources omit a great number of the laments from

Sunday worship, and if a lament psalm is included, the lament portion of it is omitted from the reading.

For example, in the reading for this year (Year B), on the fifth Sunday of the Easter season, the designated psalm reading was Psalm 22:25-31, the portion of the psalm that expresses the assurance that God will respond to the situation of the lament. The first seventeen verses of Psalm 22, a classic and well-known lament (beginning "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), is usually read on Good Friday, a context in which Jesus

recites these psalm words, and therefore we have trouble hearing this psalm in any way other than in the context of the cross.

What does our denial of the pain and hurt present among us reveal about our understanding of worship? What keeps us from using this incredible resource of laments to acknowledge that “someone’s crying, Lord, come by here”? Do we imagine that the church’s happy hour on Sunday morning is really a balm in Gilead for those worshipers who live with brokenness and isolation? Why do we question that a probing and doubting faith is indeed faith?

Pastors know that people who suffer, question, and feel confused sit in the pews every Sunday. Far too frequently those who are in the midst of pain and loss come to Sunday morning worship knowing that this is not a place where they will find their confusion, hurts, and doubts honored and respected. Far too often no

We have not learned how to name and grieve injustice, oppression, and suffering. The laments teach us how to shape our woes into prayers that describe suffering in accurate and graphic terms while still expressing trust in God.

one will give voice to the pain they bring into worship as their Sunday offering. Far too much of the time the church advocates, at least implicitly, that Christians adopt a stoic attitude toward untimely death, bankruptcy, divorce, abuse, tragedy, and adversity of any kind.

The psalms of lament, which speak of both suffering and trust, are shunted aside in most public, corporate worship settings. For the most part, we in the established, privileged church have not learned how to name and grieve the injustice, oppression, and suffering in our midst, in our communities, and in the

wider world. The laments found in the Psalter teach us how to shape our woes into prayers that describe suffering in accurate and graphic terms while still expressing trust in God.

I am convinced that we have weakened our faith and trust in God by neglecting and avoiding the psalms of lament. Yet we will not be able to reclaim these psalms without carefully attending to what they say, how they work, and why they have been so important to those who are suffering from illness, injustice, or isolation.

I contend that we neglect and avoid the psalms of lament for several reasons. First, we *misunderstand* these psalms because we do not listen to the precise way they address the injustice and the

horrific circumstances out of which they emerge. Second, we *avoid* these psalms because we have determined in advance that they do not fit our practical theology, which enjoins “giving thanks at all times.” Third, we *are uncomfortable with* these psalms in corporate worship because of the abrasive, polemical language that erupts from the lips of the psalmist. These three reasons for omitting the psalms of lament are interwoven, and they reinforce one another.

Misunderstanding the laments

As we voice our prayers in corporate worship, we need to observe both what we say and to whom we are speaking. The audience of the psalms of lament is a double set of listeners: God and the congregation. The primary and most important person addressed is God. In the lament section of the psalm, which states the grievance and describes the trouble and injustice, the speaker, without fail, addresses God. God is the court to which the psalmist is bringing the accusation. God is the one who is expected to rule (render a verdict) in the case, and God is the one who is expected to carry out the *naḥam* (vindication, setting things right)

for the plaintiff who is bringing the case to God’s attention within God’s court.

The setting of the laments is the court of God’s royal—judicial and executive—authority. The setting transforms the lament from bellyaching and a search for allies into a full-blown court case presented to God for vindication.

We misunderstand the laments when we hear these prayers as moaning and whining by unhappy people annoyed by the situation in which they find themselves. The setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of these laments is not the local coffee shop or sewing circle; the setting is the court of God’s royal authority, both judicial and executive. The setting transforms the lament from bellyaching and a search for supportive allies into a full-blown court case presented to God for vindication. Using the

psalmist’s language, we speak of coming to worship as “entering God’s courts”; if in this setting we bring our lament, what we are entering is the royal place of judgment where the king is present to hear the case and make a ruling. We are not only in the courtyard, outside the holy place, but in the presence of the great king.

The psalms (and all of scripture) see the great king as the one to whom vindication belongs, the one who will make just judg-

ment and carry out the appropriate action to redress the abusive, oppressive situation. God exercises legitimate, recognized power and has authority to intervene in lamentable situations. Furthermore, God's response will set things right. The Hebrew scriptures understand effective vindication (*naḥam*) as producing the desired result of true justice (*mishpat*), righteousness (*tsedeqah*), and peace (*shalom*), characterized by realigning the situation into right, healthy relationships (*tsedeqah*) and providing the parties involved with what is truly needed (justice; that is, *mishpat*), not just what is deserved. Too often we (and the translators of scripture) have

Jesus concludes the parable of the oppressed widow with a question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" That is, will people trust and rely on the legitimate judge and sole ruler to work vindication?"

misunderstood God's vindication (*naḥam*), because we have mistranslated *naḥam* as "vengeance," which has the primary connotation for us of "getting even, repaying in kind, retaliation." As a result, *naḥam* has often come to mean an eye-for-an-eye system of law, a law of retaliation (*lex talionis*).

It is apparent that Jesus understood the significance of lament. Consider, for example, his parable about the oppressed widow (Luke 18:1-8), a riddle about praying and not losing heart. The widow, whose faith Jesus holds up as exemplary, makes her plea for justice and

vindication to an unjust judge—who eventually listens. The widow rejects three possible responses: she will not accept her situation as God-given suffering; she does not wallow in her grief and pain by telling her story to anyone who will listen; and she does not attempt to take matters into her own hands, becoming a vigilante who acts on her own behalf to get even. Though the judge in the parable is unjust (unlike God), the widow still recognizes that this judge alone can carry out *naḥam*, because he has the authority and power to correct her situation. Even though he is unjust, this judge alone can remedy her unendurable situation and deal with her enemy. Jesus concludes the parable with a summary question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" That is, will people trust and rely on the legitimate judge and sole ruler to work vindication here in our setting?

The lament describes the situation of injustice and suffering not to create sympathy and pity in the listener (the congregation),

nor to vent emotion in order to bring about some cathartic release. The lament is a plea for help, made in the divine courtroom, a plea that requires a description of the situation that needs to be rectified.

Especially when we hear the individual laments in worship, we are not speaking of a situation that all in the congregation are facing. Only when the lament is communal do we express the common dilemma of all who make the lament. In most laments (especially those of an individual), we are raising to God's attention a situation that only one person or perhaps several people are bringing to the bench of God's court.

Avoidance and discomfort

We avoid these lament psalms in worship because they bring raw emotion and abrasive language about present pain into our setting of privilege. The lament that describes oppression from within the

We avoid lament psalms in worship because they bring raw emotion into our setting of privilege. The lament that describes oppression from within the experience of the injustice seems too polemical.

experience of the injustice seems too polemical and passionate for our tastes; it is too explicit about injustices. There has been no cleanup of the disaster; the psalmist depicts it viscerally, in all its messiness.

These psalms work precisely because they are not descriptions by a detached onlooker. We hear the grievance from the mouth of the plaintiff (or the plaintiff's surrogate), rather than listening to a report about the complaint. That is, we hear people who are poor and oppressed tell their own story and make their own case; we do not hear about them as

objects of a bad situation. In laments, the person in trouble, the one with the complaint, speaks as the subject, in the first person. In intercession, by contrast, the person who has the complaint is the object and is spoken about, in the third person.

The laments are powerful and effective because we hear the people who are suffering the injustice and oppression speak personally and immediately about their distress. These prayers of lament come to us not at arm's length, as neutral prayers of intercession about "them," but as intense, impassioned outbursts from the lips of the one being abused and mistreated. This quality

persists even if the case is made by a proxy who speaks for the complainants—who, as the lament often states, have no energy or capability to speak, because of the suffering that enervates and paralyzes them.

No wonder we are uncomfortable with the prayers of lament. It is not surprising that we usher these outbursts about injustice, abuse, and mistreatment outside the walls of our sanctuaries, or obstruct their entrance. It would be shocking to invite those who are suffering to bring their alienation and agony into God's courts. We find it much easier to be "the quiet in the land" (a traditional

Perhaps the most misunderstood and therefore excluded elements are the shocking pleas made of God to bring judgment on oppressors because of their unjust actions. This specific type of petition has commonly been mislabeled *curse*.

characterization of Mennonites) than to invite those who suffer from poverty, abuse, pain, fear, disruption, neglect, loneliness, and isolation to find their voices within our gatherings. The silencing of the lament becomes more and more prevalent where our congregations are people of privilege, whether that privilege is of affluence, status, education, recognition, or social or political security.

In these lament psalms, perhaps the most misunderstood and therefore excluded elements are the shocking pleas made of God to bring judgment on oppressors because of

their unjust actions. This specific type of petition has commonly been mislabeled *curse*. Although the semantic field of the curse and the petition is similar, the semantic force is directionally different. Both the curse and the petition state the desired impact on the oppressor—with a subtle but important difference. When the curse form is used, the speaker is operating with the assumption that the words themselves have the power to begin the process spoken of. When the speaker curses an enemy, the powerful words of the curse begin to enact the reality expressed in the words. The speaker is unleashing the debilitating effects of the words on the person cursed. The opposite of the curse is the blessing, and the same presupposition holds true for the blessing: the spoken word is powerful, and blessings are actually a process of empowerment effectively strengthening and enhancing the life of the blessing's recipient.

If we transform the content of Psalm 69:22-25 into a curse, the speaker directly addresses the enemy, with the expectation that the speaker has the power to loose the harsh, disabling results:

*May **your** table be a trap for **you**, a snare for **your** allies.
May **your** eyes be darkened so that **you** cannot see,
and may **your** loins tremble continually.
May God's indignation be poured out on **you**,
and may God's anger overtake **you**.
May **your** camp be a desolation;
let no one live in **your** tents.*

When we hear these same words as a petition, the desire may be the same, but the one who carries out the desire is not the one making the plea. The words are addressed to God the great king rather than the enemy, and the action is now screened through God's judicial process; God is the one entrusted with responsibility for carrying out the sentence. Control of the punishment is surrendered to the judge rather than retained by the plaintiff. The petition reinforces the gravity of the oppression and abuse, while at the same time turning the sentencing over to the judge:

*Let **their** table be a trap for **them**, a snare for **their** allies.
Let **their** eyes be darkened so that **they** cannot see,
and make **their** loins tremble continually.
Pour out your indignation upon **them**,
and let your burning anger overtake **them**.
May **their** camp be a desolation;
let no one live in **their** tents.*

This distinction between such petitions and curses or blessings helps us sort out Paul's advice in Romans 12:14: "Bless those who persecute you; bless, do not curse them." As the people of God, we are called to bring blessing on all peoples and nations, whether they be friends or enemies. God's people are not to use words (or actions) that have the effect of tearing down, wounding, abusing, belittling, and diminishing others. As Paul goes on to say at the end of Romans 12, "Leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vindication is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

Because we have sometimes misunderstood these petitions about enemies as curses, and because we are uncomfortable with

raw and abrasive language, many Christian traditions have selected from the psalms primarily words of praise (hymns) and thanksgiving. The prayers of trust that express the participants' reliance on God are also regular fare in Christian worship.

It is this misunderstanding and discomfort that lead us to exile these psalms routinely and unquestioningly from our worship services. In the lectionaries in use in many denominations, the dearth of laments is striking. Where the laments do crop up within these lectionaries, they are frequently included because the early church found in them allusions to the suffering and persecution of

How can we recover the voice of the oppressed and abused within our worship? The solution is not difficult or profound: use the laments in their entirety in worship.

Jesus. It is common practice to excise the offensive parts of the psalms, especially petitions concerning enemies, and most often the deleted sections are the parts where the lament itself is stated.

The one place where the laments have traditionally been included in corporate worship is in the daily office as shaped by the Benedictine tradition. The Rule of Benedict outlines a complete reading of the entire book of the Psalms once every week—

including all the laments. As the newer arrangements of the daily office have been made, there is a widespread tendency to select a smaller number of psalms to be read throughout the weekly (or monthly) cycle of reading. The result of this selectivity is that fewer psalms of lament are included in the morning and evening prayers.

Remedying the situation

How can we recover the voice of the oppressed and abused within our worship? The solution is not difficult or profound: use the laments in their entirety in worship. The most helpful approach is for the one speaking the lament to preface the prayer by identifying who today is bringing this prayer to God. Is the lament coming from an abused spouse? a laid-off employee? a social pariah? an immigrant who is being denied basic human rights? a political detainee? a sweatshop worker? someone who is part of an oppressed minority group? The power of the lament comes when we move from making intercession for one of these people to letting

their impassioned statement of grievance and primitive plea resound within our worship. Let the laments begin! Let God the sovereign be acknowledged as ruler of all nations!

About the author

Ron Guengerich is a pastor at Zion Mennonite Church in Archbold, Ohio. Before pastoring, he taught at Hesston College (Hesston, Kansas) and Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Harrisonburg, Virginia), following doctoral studies in Old Testament at the University of Michigan.

Prayer and action

Personal reflections

Duane Shank

In May 1944 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter on the occasion of the baptism of his friend Eberhard Bethge's son (Bonhoeffer's grandnephew). In this letter, smuggled out of prison,¹ Bonhoeffer notes that "your birth provides us with a suitable occasion to reflect on the changes that time brings, and to try to scan the outlines of the future." After recounting the situation in which the German church found itself, he noted,

*We are once again being driven right back to the beginnings of our understanding. Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship—all these things are so difficult and so remote that we hardly venture any more to speak of them. In the traditional words and acts we suspect that there may be something quite new and revolutionary, though we cannot as yet grasp or express it. That is our own fault. Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to [humanity] and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action.... All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action."*²

Those words have become a motto for me. In my life as a political strategist, activist, and organizer, I have attempted to live a life of righteous action and am increasingly sustained by a life of prayer. And I increasingly believe that that the action is difficult, if not impossible, without the prayer.

Partners with God

This conviction is based on a fundamental grounding of my faith and spirituality. I believe that our calling is to become partners with God in changing the world, in bringing the world closer to its final redemption in the reign of God. This belief is expressed by Abraham Joshua Heschel in *God in Search of Man*:

*This is the mysterious paradox of Biblical faith: God is pursuing man. It is as if God were unwilling to be alone, and He had chosen man to serve Him. Our seeking him is not only man's but also His concern, and must not be considered an exclusively human affair. His will is involved in our yearnings. All of human history as described in the Bible may be summarized in one phase: God is in search of man.*³

I believe that the work I do is God's work, and that I work with God in bringing the kingdom of God closer on earth. And that through prayer, I can talk with God and listen to God as I seek strength, wisdom, and guidance in that work.

But that prayer is integrally coupled with action. Walter Wink describes the interaction between the two:

*We have all known Christians for whom prayer is a substitute for action, who dump on God the responsibility for doing what God's groaning in us is seeking to impel us to do. But action is also no substitute for prayer. For some, action is a cover for unbelief; they simply do not believe that God is able to act in the world. Since God cannot change things, we must. For others, who feel called by God to establish justice, prayer seems a waste of precious time. But long-term struggle requires constant inner renewal, else the wells of love run dry. Social action without prayer is soulless; but prayer without action lacks integrity."*⁴

A daily prayer

Inside my office door at Sojourners is a ceramic mezuzah (a small case traditionally affixed to the doorpost of a Jewish family's home, containing a scroll inscribed with the Shema).⁵ My mezuzah includes Mark 12:29-30,⁶ a text where Jesus adds Leviticus 19:18

to his recitation of the Shema. As I walk into the office each morning, I stop and recite: “The LORD is God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

This recital is first an affirmation that only one is God—that there is one to whom all commitment and loyalty are owed. This confession is the root of the fight against idolatry, whether in ancient Israel, in Jesus’ time, or in ours. Today the false gods

**“The LORD is God,
the LORD alone”
is our pledge of
allegiance, a
reminder that no
cause, no move-
ment, no ideology,
no party, no candi-
date can command
the loyalty we owe
to God alone.**

challenged in the Hebrew scriptures go by the names of militarism, racism, and nationalism, but the challenge is the same. To what do we owe our ultimate, deepest loyalty?

This teaching is important these days. Our nation’s leaders demand our loyalty: you’re either with us or against us; it’s good against evil. To which we respond, “The LORD is God, the LORD alone.” It is our pledge of allegiance, our statement of intent to obey God’s instructions. This proclamation is linked to the kingship—the kingdom—of God. If one

acknowledges God and affirms that there is no other God, one is accepting God’s kingdom and the terms of that kingdom. This daily prayer is an important reminder for one involved in political action that no cause, no movement, no ideology, no party, or no candidate can command the loyalty we owe to God and God alone.

A prayer service for peace

As the crisis leading toward war with Iraq was building, Sojourners decided in early January 2003 to hold a prayer service for peace at the Washington National Cathedral on Martin Luther King Day, January 20. A four-mile procession to the White House would follow our worship.

We had three weeks to organize the event. I led a staff team that worked with cathedral staff to plan the service, do the necessary outreach and publicity, secure participation from church leaders and prominent speakers, get the needed police permits for the march, and attend to a host of other details. The morning of

the event, after a short meeting in the bishop's office to go over the last details, we were ready to go the few hundred yards to the cathedral to begin the service.

I noticed a small chapel next to the office and decided to spend a few minutes there. Kneeling before the altar, I prayed: "Lord, I've done all I can do. I've tried to cover every detail. Now it's up to you. I leave it in your hands. May this service and this day be a witness to your call to peacemaking."

As I entered the cathedral, I saw a standing-room-only crowd of 3,500 people. The service was powerful and inspiring, and the procession smooth and moving. Our prayer and procession was a powerful way to express opposition to the coming war and provided a sharp contrast to the harsh political rhetoric that dominated other actions that weekend.

A prayer vigil on Capitol Hill

Throughout 2005, we had been working on a "Budgets Are Moral Documents" campaign, challenging proposed cuts in services—food stamps, Medicaid, student loans, etc.—to those in poverty. The congressional debate came down to the week before Christmas, with climactic votes scheduled in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Several weeks earlier, we had begun planning a prayer vigil to be held at a House office building, to dramatize the voices of those who were shut out of the debate and to say that it was time for a moral resistance to an immoral federal budget. On Tuesday evening, December 13, some 300 people gathered in a Capitol Hill church for singing, powerful preaching, and prayer seeking God's guidance in the next day's action. Wednesday morning, after a period of nonviolence training and extended prayers, we walked to the Cannon House Office Building. After a short service with more preaching and prayer, 115 people knelt or sat on the steps leading to the building entrance. After the required warnings, Capitol police began arresting folks one-by-one, while those remaining continued singing and praying. In the words of one participant,

The greatest blessing for me came in the form of a gift that I did not expect. I did not anticipate the level of spiritual power that I experienced. I had never participated in

direct civil disobedience before last Wednesday. As the day approached, my mind was filled with wondering about what would happen and how I would react. When the time came to kneel in prayer on the steps of the Cannon Office Building, there was a sense of peace and community that made me feel at home. This form of embodied faith took me to a new level of advocacy for others and personal commitment to justice. Being in the presence of so many other sisters and brothers in Christ taught me a real lesson in the power of Christian community. The love and support shared by those on the steps and those surrounding us gave me a sense of peace and well-being that left no room for the fear that I expected to arise within me. The whole experience of being arrested and processed felt more like a day of spiritual renewal than a day of bearing the consequences of our illegal activity.

Another wrote,

No matter what the final outcomes in Congress, our time in prayer was worthwhile and effective. We definitely moved hearts.... As one who volunteers regularly with the poor, and one who is actively pursuing a career in social work and advocacy, I am deeply grateful for the fellowship and inspiration provided to me this past week. Our time together gave me increased courage, a renewed sense of purpose, and a lightness in my heart as I am reminded of the love, the hope, and the joy I know.

Sojourners

Sojourners is known as an activist organization, but everything we do is immersed in prayer. We have a monthly chapel service, every day at noon a small group gathers to pray, and many staff meetings open with prayer. I convene a weekly meeting of our policy, organizing, and media staff to discuss the issues and campaigns we're working on and to coordinate that work. We begin with prayer asking God for guidance and wisdom as we discuss the issues—from the federal budget to Iraq, Darfur to the minimum wage—and discern what our response should be and how we

should go about making it. In Abraham Joshua Heschel's words, "Prayer is a perspective from which to behold, from which to respond to, the challenges we face. Man in prayer does not seek to impose his will on God; he seeks to impose God's will and mercy upon himself."⁷

I pray because I recognize my human weakness and my need for the grace of God in order to carry on. There are days when cynicism and depression about the state of the world begin to raise their heads: why do I continue to do political work when all around it seems so hopeless? On those occasions, my prayer is often the words of Thomas Dorsey's famous song:

*Precious Lord, take my hand,
lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
lead me on to the light,
take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*⁸

And I find strength in these words from Hebrews 4:16: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." I seek to approach God with boldness, to pour out my heart and soul, my stress and struggle, my reluctance to let go. And to trust and believe that when I do so, I will receive mercy and find grace.

And in that grace I find the strength to carry on, to work with God to bring God's reign closer to reality.

Notes

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, 1943, and imprisoned in Berlin. After a failed attempt on Hitler's life (July 20, 1944), documents were found that linked Bonhoeffer with the conspiracy, and he was executed on April 9, 1945.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge," in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 299–300. Emphasis added.

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 136.

⁴ Walter Wink, "Prayer and the Powers," chapter 16 in *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 306.

⁵ "Hear O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" (Deut. 6:4-5).

⁶“The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

⁷Abraham Joshua Heschel, “On Prayer,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1996), 259.

⁸Thomas A. Dorsey, 1932; no. 576 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

About the author

Duane Shank is Senior Policy Advisor for Sojourners/Call to Renewal. He has been involved in peace and justice work for thirty-five years as a community organizer in the rural south, in interfaith coalitions, in the nuclear weapons freeze, and in Central America solidarity movements of the 1980s. A Mennonite, Duane is a member of the Community of Christ ecumenical congregation in Washington, DC.

From generation to generation

A conversation about prayer

Lois Schertz and Don Yost

In this intergenerational interview Don Yost converses with Lois Schertz, his mother-in-law, about her practices of prayer, and those of her husband, Russell. Don's comments are in italics, Lois's in regular type.

When you are all by yourself, do you pray before you eat?

I do—not all the time, but often.

For years praying was a formality, a deeply ingrained habit formed in my childhood. I never heard my parents pray audibly. Praying in some form, however, was mandatory. We were not allowed to taste the food on the table until we all sat down and had a silent prayer.

As a child, I was irritated when we entertained a minister or some church person, and the person spent a lot of time praying for everyone and everything and added the food at the end. I sat looking longingly at the food. My brother and I got into trouble when we giggled or failed to bow our heads.

Finally I asked my mother why prayer was so important when it was time to eat. She replied tersely, “Don’t you know that food is a privilege? The least you can do is say thank you.” I knew that she had known hunger as a child, as her father used the grocery money to buy beer.

Now that I am older than my mother was at the time, I see the value and the correlation between prayer and hospitality. I will explain this in detail later when I incorporate some of Russell’s prayers.

How are your prayers before a meal different from your prayers at night?

Prayer throughout the years has become a more integral part of my life. Private prayer is now much more meaningful to me than

public prayers—especially prayers before a meal in a restaurant—are.

Prayer and faith in God are the only absolutes in my life. Through difficulties, prayer is the one place where I feel free to complain, grouse, and even try to impress God with my idea that life is unfair. I feel the presence of God. I know someone is listening, and usually I ease into a sense of peace and calm, which leads

I pause before eating, mainly because it's so easy to miss feeling grateful for the precious gifts of food and weather and breathing. The moment before a meal is like touching a cornerstone.

me into a time of confession, thanksgiving, and petition for forgiveness. I don't know what I would do at times if it were not for the comfort of prayer.

I want to know how you answer these questions.

I feel differently than you do about public and private prayer.

I have a hard time praying by myself. I think it's because I have a pretty keen sense of God's presence almost all the time. There's a way in which I sense God speaking to me and listening to

me every moment of the day. It seems like God already knows what I think and feel.

Public prayer seems more useful. (I sound like a pragmatist.) When we pray as a family or a congregation, we're listening to each other. Our prayers help us know what we as a family or a community want and need—what we feel bad about, what we are celebrating.

Even though I'm not good at solitary prayer, I try to pause before eating, mainly for the reason you mentioned. It's so easy to miss feeling grateful for the precious gifts of food and weather and breathing. The moment before a meal is like touching a cornerstone.

Tell me the stories about Russell. I remember his mealtime prayers as a combination of jazz and poetry. He had a whole litany of lyric phrases that he improvised into a whole.

When I think of Russell's table prayers, I think about hospitality. One way my thinking of table prayers has changed is because Russell and I entertained so many people in our home who are either unbelievers or just not interested in church or prayer.

When I was teaching school, I was one of the few teachers in my school system who attended church regularly. It was not that

the others were against church, but they were often just plain busy. When new, younger teachers who had no family in the area came into the school, I enjoyed inviting them into our home for dinner. While I was busy putting food on the table, these guests would sometimes start filling their plates before we had a chance to pray. This bothered Russell, and in respect for him, I finally told them we had a custom of saying prayer before the meal. They graciously participated in the prayer, but it often evoked interesting responses.

One young woman, who was working on her PhD in counseling, spent some time with students in my classroom. In conversation I learned that she was an agnostic. I invited her to dinner, and after the customary prayer, she immediately countered Russell by asking, "And sir, do you create a new one each time?" This led to a conversation that went on long into the evening, as she became interested in our faith, church, etc. She had no religious background and had not heard of Mennonites.

Another young teacher spent a lot of time in our home. Our friendship continues. She and her husband are members of the Catholic church but do not attend regularly. They live in Chicago and visit frequently. When they would call, they'd often say, "Life at work is hectic. The kids are driving us crazy. May we come for your good food and Russell's prayers?"

Some years ago, our former daughter-in-law called from Philadelphia and informed us that her mother, who lived in South Bend, had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The mother had no connections with a church or a minister, and her daughter wondered if we could visit her mother and pray. She said her mother remembered the prayers we had before meals when she visited our home. This call led to three meaningful visits before her death.

One time when grandchildren were visiting us, something funny happened, and they could not stop giggling during the prayer. Grandma did not help the situation (I was giggling too). Grandpa (Russell) said, "Since no one is listening, Lord, I'll just ask you to bless the gigglers and sign off—Amen!" Recently one of those grandchildren told me he hoped I was continuing Grandpa's prayers.

So prayer before a meal with company is a kind of witness.

It may have that result, but I think of it more as creating an atmosphere.

Right—you said prayer was a form of hospitality.

It helps people of different faiths or no faith feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts. It puts everyone at ease when the prayer is simple and remembers those sitting around the table.

That's why humor is so important. When we laugh during table prayer, it's a way of saying that we all mess up. We are all human. We can relax in front of God. None of us is too good or pious for a little self-deprecating laughter.

You talked about feeling God's presence at all times. Sometimes I think life is a constant prayer. I like the quote, "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, unuttered or expressed."¹

I agree. It's interesting that when I write plays or screenplays, the most important thing I need to know about a character is what that character wants. In plays, we learn about this desire through action—what a character decides to do. But in life, I think we often learn about what we want as we pray.

When I'm alone, my table prayers are often hymns. When I am most alone and I feel abandoned and discouraged, this hymn keeps running through my mind:

Alone with God, the world forbidden,
Alone with God, O blest retreat!
Alone with God, and in Him hidden,
To hold with Him communion sweet.²

What about praying in restaurants before a meal? Do you find that this kind of prayer nurtures hospitality?

To be honest, I am bothered when I am with friends who want to pray aloud in a restaurant. I have heard remarks that this is a way to be an example. Isn't there a verse in the Bible where Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and admonishes them to go to the closet to pray?

Does that mean we have to eat in the closet as well as pray there?

You'll be the only one eating in the closet if you keep making fun of me!

One phrase that Russell often used in his mealtime prayer was, "Bless this food and the hands that prepared it." Do you ask for God's blessing? What does God do when God blesses? Are we asking God to do something, or does this phrase have a different meaning?

I do not think I use the words *blessing* or *bless* as much as Russell did. When I pray for my grandchildren, I often ask God to bless them, and my intention is that they will feel the presence of God in their lives.

Part of the atmosphere of hospitality that our table prayers create is a sense of forgiveness and acceptance. We're just people. Joking during prayer makes things relaxing and intimate.

Knowing you, that prayer comes from the deepest longing of your heart—"the soul's sincere desire."

You asked about Russell's prayers. The one phrase that the family questioned was when he prayed, "Bless this food for its intended use."

God gives us sustenance. We can choose to use that gift to do God's will or to do the opposite. To me, Russell's phrase was a way of saying, "Help us do your will."

I think the thing that endeared Russell to people who heard his prayers at the table was that he always mentioned each one of them, a special thing about them. He thought about this ahead of time.

I didn't know that. No wonder his mealtime prayers were so special. The family often gave him a hard time.

Hard time?

We always hold hands around the table when we pray. There was often some hand squeezing and peeking and giggling. Participants often interrupted Russell's prayer to comment or joke about something he said or about the family. Did you or Russell ever get annoyed that the family wasn't more reverent?

I never got annoyed. In fact, I often did and still do contribute to the giggling. Part of the atmosphere of hospitality that our table

prayers create is a sense of forgiveness and acceptance. We're just people. Joking during prayer makes things relaxing and intimate. Being formal gives an air of stiffness and distance. You know my personal prayers are not pious. There are times when I feel the need to laugh and joke with the Creator!

It's just like when we laugh and joke with the people we love.

Notes

¹From the hymn text "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire," by James Montgomery (1818); no. 572 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

²"Alone with God"; text by Johnson Oatman Jr. (1856–1922).

About the authors

Lois Schertz is a full-time, professional grandmother and a retired educator. She grew up and lived near Lowpoint, Illinois, until 1980, when she and Russell moved to Goshen, Indiana. Lois served on the executive committee of the Illinois Mennonite Conference. Don Yost directs Bridgework Theater and writes screenplays. Both Lois and Don attend College Mennonite Church in Goshen.

The obscure night of prayer

Dan Schrock

In a recent issue of *Christianity Today*, Charles Colson writes about his soul's dark night, suggesting that the best of evangelicalism, which had nurtured him for thirty-two years, had not prepared him for the unnerving experience of God's distance.¹ His faith had taught him to expect unfailing intimacy with God. What happens when it seems that God has suddenly withdrawn?

I am not sure how well the best of most Protestant traditions has prepared us for the dark night. Although many of us experience it at least once, if not several times, in our life of faith, few of us talk about it. Most of us mistakenly assume the dark night comes from new sin, spiritual laziness, burnout, or depression.² But the dark night of the soul—or as I propose it might better be

The dark night of the soul is not caused by sin, spiritual laziness, burnout, or depression, and it will not disappear through repentance, work, rest, or treatment for depression. Although it feels painful, the dark night of the soul is a gift from God.

named, the “obscure night”—is not caused by any of these, and it will not disappear through repentance, hard work, rest, or treatment for depression. Although it feels painful, the dark night is actually a wonderful gift from God.

The three signs

A few weeks after Easter, Terry stopped by the church.³ As his pastor for the previous six years, I had worked with him on several congregational committees, including the elders. A successful businessman in his late thirties, Terry owned a thriving floral shop downtown.

“Do you have a few minutes?” he wondered.

“Yes,” I replied, swinging away from my computer to face him.

“What’s on your mind?”

He walked in, carefully shut the door of my study, and sat down in one of my armchairs. Taking a deep breath, he stared out

the window for half a minute before responding. “Your sermon last Sunday on John 21:1-14. You talked about Simon Peter and six other disciples who went fishing one long, dark night but caught absolutely nothing.”

I nodded.

“That’s me. I can’t catch anything in my spiritual life. I try to pray but the words barely come. God seems far off, inaccessible, maybe even absent. I’m stuck and don’t know what to do.”

I tried to look calm but was inwardly astonished. Could he be talking about a dark night? Although I had never offered Terry personal spiritual guidance as I had done for others in the congregation, I thought I knew him well. I had struggled with him and the other elders through difficult issues in the congregation. I had drunk latte with him several times at the coffeehouse a few doors from his floral shop. I thought of him as a Christian who breezed along merrily in his relationship with God, but maybe my assumptions were wrong. I encouraged him to say more. “How long has this been going on?”

“About four years, ever since my father died in the car accident. Since then I’ve had no idea where God is.”

My eyebrows arched. “That’s a long time to feel distant from God. You aren’t able to pray the way you used to pray?”

“Right.”

“May I ask a few more questions?”

He nodded. “Sure. I came to talk about this.”

“I know you love to sing. How have you been experiencing Sunday morning worship services?”

His face grew sad. “Flat. Some Sundays I can’t open my mouth during the hymns. I look at the page, but I can’t focus. The notes and words swim under my eyes. Even if I manage to sing, it leaves me feeling hollow inside.”

“You feel your spiritual life has stalled out—you can’t pray or sing. How do you feel about your work at the shop?”

“Well,” he paused, “financially the business is fine, and I believe flowers are a ministry to people at births, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, funerals, and so on. But my work doesn’t satisfy me any more. I’m surrounded all day by some of the most beautiful things God ever created, and the flowers are like ashes in my hands.”

We sat in silence for a little while. “You’re not receiving any satisfaction in either your spiritual life or your work life,” I said.

He nodded.

“I know you enjoy being with people, but do you yearn for more solitude or silence?”

His eyes grew large. “Yes! In the evenings when the weather is nice, I’ve been going out for quiet walks along the river. Being away from other people and near the water is a balm to my soul. And last winter, I discovered that most nights I just wanted to build a fire in the fireplace, sit in the rocking chair, and watch the flames dance. I wasn’t doing or thinking of anything in particular, but I just watched. It gave me peace.”

I thought for a moment. “What do you want more than anything else? What’s your deepest desire right now?”

Terry’s eyes focused with a hungry, pained look. “God. More than anything else, I want to feel the presence of God in my life again, like I did before Dad died. But I’m stuck. I’m confused by all this and I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Although it feels devastating, the dark night purifies our desires and brings us into new friendship with God. God does not abandon us, but through a fresh outpouring of light and love, God works with us in intimate ways.

Terry exhibits all three signs of the dark night that were first outlined by John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite: a sense of dryness in one’s spiritual life, an inability to pray in the usual way, and a growing desire to be alone in loving awareness of God. For it to be a dark night, all three must be present at the same time.⁴ During the dark night it seems as if God has partially withdrawn or become wholly absent, leaving us feeling abandoned. Although it feels devastating, the

dark night purifies our desires—our loves—and brings us into new friendship with God. God does not abandon us during the dark night (Ps. 139:7-12), but through a fresh outpouring of light and love, God works with us in intimate ways.

The sense of obscurity

While the experience of dryness, of being unable to pray, and of yearning for a seemingly absent God has been around at least since biblical times, John of the Cross (1542–1591) was the first

in Christian history to coin the phrase “dark night,” and his description of the phenomenon and how God acts in it remain compelling. Although people now sometimes talk about “the dark night of the soul,” John never used the term *la noche oscura de la alma*, and often simply called it *la noche oscura*, usually translated as “the dark night.”

I prefer to translate *oscura* as “obscure,” for two reasons. First, in English usage *dark* can allude to immorality. The first figurative meaning of the word as an adjective is: “characterized by absence of moral or spiritual light; evil, wicked; also, in a stronger sense, characterized by a turpitude or wickedness of sombre or unrelieved nature; foul, iniquitous, atrocious.”⁵ For John of the Cross, though, the *noche oscura* is not caused by the absence of moral or spiritual light but precisely by the presence of God’s transforming light shining into us.

Second, the word *obscure* echoes the subjective experience of confusion that we typically sense in the night. In interviews I conducted in the fall of 2005 with people who were in a night, they repeatedly described how obscure this experience was for them. One woman, for instance, used the metaphor of a map. She had always thought of herself traveling on the main highway with God, but after entering the night she felt as though she were alone on an unmarked dirt road on the far edge of the map, with no signs telling her where this road would take her. In these interviews, only people who had emerged on the other side of the night were able to look back and trace what God had been doing.

God’s purpose in the night

In Mark 12:29-30, Jesus (quoting Deut. 6:4-5) names the central teaching of scripture: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Our central purpose is to love God fully, and then to let that love lead to love for neighbor (Mark 12:31).

But sooner or later, even after our baptism into Christ, most of us fall in love with, and ultimately come to worship, things that are not God: a new computer, an academic degree, a mentor, esteem from our colleagues. We can also become attached to spiritual things, such as a certain method of Bible study, a specific

practice of prayer, a church building, or a religious ideal like “the baby killers have to be stopped” or “give justice to the poor.” The problem is our attachment, which takes up spiritual space that we could otherwise dedicate to loving God and others.

Attachments are notoriously subtle. In the four obscure nights that God has given me so far, I have learned, to my chagrin, how quickly I become attached to even innocuous things. These

God wants to be the recipient of our deepest love and highest commitment. The obscure night is a tool God uses to cut out the cancer of our disordered attachments, freeing us to love God as God.

attachments can become idolatrous, stirring up God’s jealousy (Exod. 20:4-5). God wants to be our primary focus, the recipient of our deepest love and highest commitment, but disordered attachments stand in the way.

The obscure night is a tool God uses to cut out the cancer of our disordered attachments, freeing us to love God as God. To borrow a biblical image, in the obscure night God prunes attachments that do not produce spiritual health (John 15:1-2). This explains why the obscure night sometimes feels awful:

we are being pruned. As God trims our lesser loves, our yearning for God intensifies in response to the divine love pouring into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). In the light of God’s love, our lesser loves are reordered and put in their proper place. By drying up the shallow satisfactions that we have found in our disordered attachments, the Holy Spirit deepens our desire for the true satisfaction that God offers.

In the obscure night, God furthers the process of transformation begun at our baptism. For some people the night is tantamount to a second conversion experience. By softening our disordered attachments, God dissolves some of the old, stubborn sin that we cannot eradicate through our practices of Christian virtue and discipleship. By removing the pleasure we felt at buying a new car, God dethrones materialism. By drying up the delight that rushed through us after we received a big promotion, God prevents us from idolizing our work. By withdrawing the satisfaction we once found in a particular spiritual practice, God turns us away from worshiping the practice and refocuses our worship on God alone. Because of the obscure night, our life takes on a more countercultural flavor.

Discursive meditation and contemplation

The obscure night also inaugurates a movement from discursive meditation into contemplation. *Discursive meditation* is a pathway of prayer and associated spiritual practices that uses words, images, and the five senses to grasp foundational knowledge about God and Christian living. We generally decide when, where, and how to carry out discursive meditation. Much of North American church life—most sermons and worship services, Bible study, Christian education classes, and theological conversation—uses discursive meditation. This is appropriate for the most part: discursive meditation is a foundational pathway in the Christian life that we never outgrow and discard.

But there is also *contemplation*, another pathway of prayer and associated spiritual practices that does not require words, images, or the five senses to receive communication from God. God largely guides when, where, and how contemplation occurs, although we may prepare ourselves for the gift of contemplation. Unlike discursive meditation, contemplation moves beyond thinking and doing to receiving God's presence and consenting to God's action, some of which is hidden from us.⁶ Contemplation is "a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love."⁷

In the obscure night, the Holy Spirit orients us toward the gift of contemplation, which marks a key development in our relationship with God. If we only practice discursive meditation, and if we continue to receive satisfaction from it, we might live under the illusion that we control most of what happens in our spiritual life. We can become attached not only to discursive meditation's pleasures but also to the notion that we have made it spiritually. But when God sours the sweetness of discursive meditation in order to interest us in contemplation, we learn that we are not in control of our spiritual life, because contemplation comes and goes as God chooses. In contemplation, we learn to rely on God for the very act of prayer.

Other than waiting for God to finish whatever purification God wants to accomplish, the best response to an obscure night is to cultivate contemplative practices that prepare us for contemplation. Centering prayer is specifically designed for this. Other contemplative practices may include *lectio divina*, walking a

labyrinth, the Jesus prayer, Taizé-style worship, and more. The Holy Spirit apparently used nature's quiet and fire's flames to open Terry to contemplation. Contemplation is available to any person of faith. I suspect that much more contemplation is going on in the lives of ordinary Christians than most of us recognize, or than much of our preaching, teaching, and worship acknowledge and bless.

Expressions

An obscure night can be mild or intense, lasting from a few weeks to many years. The longest I've witnessed is ten to twelve years, although in at least one case, Mother Teresa's, it lasted fifty years.⁸ John of the Cross distinguished the milder night of sense from the

When God sours the sweetness of discursive meditation in order to interest us in contemplation, we learn that we are not in control of our spiritual life. In contemplation, we learn to rely on God for the very act of prayer.

more intense night of spirit (as well as the active night from the passive). But John's categories, derived from medieval anthropology and scholastic theology, are difficult to discern in actual practice and do not fit as well with our understanding of the human person as an integrated whole. Nonetheless, John's insight remains valid: obscure nights come in various intensities and expressions.

The night can come at any point from soon after our baptism to just before we die. Although it may follow in the wake of one of the many forms of suffering that life throws at

us—such as death of a spouse, persistent infertility, chronic illness, job loss, hurricane devastation, war—it does not necessarily do so. It can come, as it has several times to me, when we are living in one of the more successful times of life, free from other forms of suffering. It can appear in the inner life of prayer, in marriage or family life, or in our vocational life.⁹

We often emerge from the night with a new sense of friendship (the traditional word is *union*) with God, more visible fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), a sharper sense of living counterculturally in relation to the world, and more passion about some form of mission. In what is now regarded as one of the foremost poems in the Spanish language, John of the Cross called the obscure night “more lovely than the dawn.”¹⁰ Within a year after our conversa-

tion, Terry, by his own testimony, started to notice the flame of contemplation in his life. I observed that, like many others whom God has ushered through the obscure night, he began to glow.

Notes

¹ Charles Colson, "My Soul's Dark Night," *Christianity Today*, 12 December 2005, 80.

² The distinction between the dark night and depression is an important topic that lies beyond the scope of this article. See Kevin Culligan, "The Dark Night and Depression," in *Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century*, ed. Keith J. Egan (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 119–38; a shortened version appeared in *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* 10, no. 1 (February 2004): 8–19. See also Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 155–59. Both authors agree that while a dark night and depression may occur simultaneously in a person's life, they are nevertheless distinct phenomena requiring different responses.

³ "Terry" is a composite of various people, male and female, with whom I've talked over the years. Our "conversation" is likewise invented, though representative of many I've had with people both inside and outside the congregations I've pastored.

⁴ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.13.2–4; *The Dark Night*, 1.9.2–3, 8; and *The Sayings of Light and Love*, 119. The standard English translation is *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "dark, a.," http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50057626?query_type=word&queryword=dark&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=2&search_id=uhr-ODkW6i-6316&hilite=50057626.

⁶ Ernest E. Larkin, "The Carmelite Tradition and Centering Prayer/Christian Meditation," in *Carmelite Prayer*, ed. Egan, 202–22; and Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 57.

⁷ John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 1.10.6.

⁸ See Carol Zaleski, "The Dark Night of Mother Teresa," *First Things* 133 (May 2003): 24–27.

⁹ A congregation or church institution, as a corporate entity, may also go through an obscure night.

¹⁰ John of the Cross, "The Dark Night," stanza 5.

About the author

Dan Schrock, one of two pastors at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship, Goshen, Indiana, is writing a book on the obscure night.

On every side I find thy hand

A sermon on Matthew 7:7-11

Mary H. Schertz

Matthew 7:7-11 is an enthusiastic and exuberant text:
Ask! Seek! Knock!

The voice is imperative.

These are orders

and there seems indeed to be some urgency about them!

But in each case the proper emphasis lies
with the second verb, not the first.

Ask and it will be **given**

Seek and you will **find**

Knock and it will be **opened**

The text is formulated as generously as possible.

There simply are no limits, no qualifications!

What will be given and found and opened
is not limited to the here and now of daily life,
nor to that “great day in the morning.”

What will be given and found and opened

is also not limited to the celebrities or the saintly,
the rich or the talented among us.

Everyone who asks, receives.

Everyone who seeks, finds.

Everyone who knocks finds that door swinging open.

Any limitation,

any qualification,

any exception

interrupts and contradicts the flow of the text.

The foundation for Jesus’ enthusiasm and exuberance here

is his certainty that God hears the one who prays.

The two illustrations are taken from everyday Jewish life.

Bread and fish are basic foods, everyday sustenance.
Stones and snakes are also mundane, everyday objects;
stones and snakes even look a little
like bread and fish,
or at least they can appear to be similar.
But when what is needed and wanted is food,
something that looks like food
but does not function as food will not do.

Jesus' illustration here reminds me of those cardboard desserts
restaurant waiters sometimes show you
to help you make up your mind about what you want.
The fake food might help you decide or even tempt you,
but if it were actually served to you,
you would soon know the difference!

Jesus' fake food argument is a common Jewish style
of making a point.
The stone and snake examples are
a "how much more" argument
—in duplicate for a double rhetorical effect.

If even earthly parents know not to give their children fake food,
how much more does God know what we need to thrive.

Jesus' radical trust does not make prayer superfluous but possible.

But Jesus' radical trust in the heavenly Parent
also raises a dilemma for us.

How do we square all that exuberant faith with our experience?
For surely we experience life
as sometimes getting and sometimes not getting,
sometimes finding and sometimes not finding,
doors opening and doors shutting!

There is a line in an Isaac Watts hymn that asks,
*Why do we then indulge our fears, suspicions and complaints?*¹
Well, sometimes there are good reasons.
There is much about life experience
that obstructs our own certainty
about the nature of God.

Traditionally, we have a couple of ways of softening this passage to make it fit into our experience better.

We say: Well, not every prayer we pray is answered,
at least not in the exact way we expect.

God just gives good gifts, or spiritual gifts.

Nor does God necessarily answer our prayers
when we ask them.

God does things on God's time, not ours.

Or we say: Well, it must be our fault:

We didn't pray fervently enough,

Or long enough,

or with the right words

or the right attitudes—or **something**.

God answers every prayer

if we can only figure out

the right way to pray.

Both these ways of softening the text have truth

and are somewhat helpful,

but they also somewhat misrepresent this text.

The "everyone" at the beginning is unequivocal
and absolutely inclusive:

Everyone who prays receives.

There is, of course, a kind of catch to this text,

as with so many of Jesus' illustrations—

another bit of evidence, perhaps,

that Jesus had a robust sense of humor.

The key to us "getting" this text is to understand

that all this ask, seek, and knock stuff

is not really about getting our own way.

The Jesus who is speaking here was also, after all,

the child who spent his early years as a refugee,

fleeing with his family into Egypt just after he was born,

hustled and hidden until that became a way of life.

The Sermon on the Mount comes early in Matthew

but it comes **after** the pilgrimage in the wilderness

where Jesus looked the very essence of evil in the eye.

It comes **after** the arrest of his cousin John,
an event that puts Jesus on the run,
withdrawing into Galilee.

Even then, at the beginning,
Jesus wasn't getting his own way all that much.
Even then he had all kinds of reasons
to indulge fear, suspicion, and complaint,
to say nothing of later, when things really got hot.

Jesus' certainty that when we ask, we receive,
when we seek, we find,
when we knock, it opens,
is not about avoiding suffering.

But neither is it about getting stones instead of bread,
although my guess is that
we often ask for stones instead of bread.

Hans Dieter Betz in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount
suggests that the asking/receiving,
seeking/finding,
knocking/opening
that Jesus is talking about
should be looked at in reference to Job.

We're not talking about success in life;
we're talking about meaning in life—
and ultimate meaning at that.

We have, in our contemporary Christian culture,
reversed faith and seeking.
Usually when we talk about being seeker-sensitive churches,
we are trying to be sensitive
to those who have newly come to faith.
We seek—and we find—and then we just quit seeking.

What I think Jesus is affirming here
is an ongoing search for meaning in faith.
In faith, through faith, by faith ... we ask questions.
In faith, through faith, by faith,
we honor the conversation
between the human and the divine.

We seek—and we find—and we seek ...

It is the journey of Job and his friends—
not seeking that leads to faith but faith that leads to seeking.

Radical trust is trust in life—
trust in the life of God and the life God created.
Our fundamental position in life
is the posture of the quester,
the seeker, the knocker on doors.
For the salty ones of the earth
it is a lifelong quest.

In radical trust,
in radical openness to life itself,
we are pilgrims on the way.

We get a sidewise glance at the profound mystery
at the heart of Job's relentless questioning of God
in the Hebrew word *ki-nam*.²
It means something like "for nothing" or "just for anyhow."

It's like when someone gives you a gift—for no reason.
It's not your birthday; it's not Christmas;
they don't want a favor in return ...
it's just "for anyhow."

Satan's question is: Will Job love God "for nothing"?
Satan assumes, of course, that Job will not love God
if God does not help him out of the mess he's in.
But for all the testy questions Job and God exchange,
neither one gives up on the other.

At the end of the day,
the God that Job hears in the whirlwind
is not only the God that Job loves *ki-nam*
but the God who loves Job *ki-nam*.

The biblical good news is
God's passionate desire for relationship with us.
The biblical good news is
that God is quite in love with us.
Not for what we can do for God...
and not, finally, for what God can do for us ...
but just because ... for anyhow ... *ki-nam*.

We ask, we seek, we knock ...
with all the confidence of the child
who **must** have a glass of water in the night ...
because God desires us,
God wants us,
God loves us.

We receive, we find,
we walk through the open door into the light.
And in that light, even if all is not well, all **is** well,
for God is with us, Emmanuel.

Today we recognize the truth that God has called us
not because God needs us to set the world right,
but because God loves us *ki-nam*.

In the words of the old hymn:

*Within Thy circling power I stand;
On every side I find Thy hand;
Awake, asleep, at home, abroad,
I am surrounded still with God.*³

Notes

¹From Isaac Watts, "Now shall my inward joys arise," 1707. In *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Hymn 39.

²I am indebted to Perry B. Yoder for this understanding of Job.

³From Isaac Watts, "Lord, Thou hast searched and seen me through." In *The Psalms of David*, 1719. Full text at <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/l/t/lthsasmt.htm>.

About the author

Mary Schertz is Professor of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, and is ordained for teaching ministry by the Indiana-Michigan and Central District conferences of Mennonite Church USA. This sermon is adapted from one she preached on the occasion of an ordination service at Kern Road Mennonite Church, South Bend, Indiana.

Seven collects

Lois H. Siemens

Scrabble-playing God,
who juxtaposes word, image, and humanity into a glorious newness,
spark my imagination,
that with new eyes of faith I will see your welcome
 and join your deep, slow work
 of forgiveness and covenant love.
In the name of Jesus, amen.

Inner-speaking God,
who nudges us into relationship in our place and time,
remove the shame of our belief that our experiences
 are unworthy to stand in your sight,
so we may see with new eyes of the heart
 your plenary address to the world.
Through Jesus, amen.

Breath of God,
whose truth winds between rocks and hard places,
open up the way for us,
that in seeking your face,
 we will encounter our sisters and brothers.
In the name of Jesus, amen.

Judging God,
who sets before us life and death, heaven and hell,
teach us the truth of these boundaries,
that we will not lose sight of your covenant love
 that holds these two worlds together.
Through the risen Christ, amen.

Clear-eyed God,
whose living encircles mystery and ambiguity,
remove the film over our eyes with care,
 because we do not tolerate ambiguity with ease,
that through mercy our lives will be spent seeing into your story.
Through the name of Jesus, amen.

Initiative-taking God,
whose long-range love propels us forward,
take initiative with me—
 knock on my door
 and open it
 when I am too scared to answer;
 with covenant love
 come into my kitchen, bedroom, and closet
 when I am paralysed by fear and hurt—
that I will take your hand and find my way home.
In the name of the Wounded One, amen.

Twenty-first-century God,
who holds the past, present, and future within your skirts,
teach us long-range vision,
that we may embrace tradition with understanding,
 diversity with imagination,
 community with grace.
Through Jesus, the one who was, and is, and is to come, amen.

About the author

Lois H. Siemens is in transition between acquiring an MDiv degree (Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2006) and assuming her new responsibilities as pastor of Superb Mennonite Church, Kerrobert, Saskatchewan. She enjoys the prayer discipline of writing collects, a form that often includes these elements: (1) naming God; (2) a description of the name, which often begins with “who”; (3) a petition; (4) a statement of hope for an outcome of the petition, which often begins with “that”; (5) a doxology. The collects printed here were inspired by her reading of *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief*, by A. James Reimer (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003).

Book review

Arthur Paul Boers

Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition, edited by John D. Roth (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001).

As a young man, I engaged Anabaptism by leaving the faith traditions of my ancestors and joining a Mennonite congregation. Mine was a literal Anabaptist (re-baptized) conversion: it entailed my being baptized as an adult, because my parents had had me christened as a child when I was less than two weeks old.

Anabaptism is trendier now than it was then, and many who engage it today choose not to make the dramatic move that I felt called to. In *Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical*

These highly personal pieces explain not just the ideas of the authors but detail how their encounter with Anabaptism changed their lives.

Tradition, United Methodist, Catholic, Christian Reformed, Baptist, and Episcopalian voices interact with Anabaptism and comment on how it has touched, enriched, and enlivened their own Christian theology and practices. The list of contributors includes ethicists, theologians, editors, and a Benedictine monk. James W. McClendon Jr., Stanley M. Hauerwas, Christopher Marshall,

Nancey Murphy, Glen H. Stassen, Samuel Escobar, Stuart Murray, Eoin de Bhaldraithe, Richard J. Mouw, Richard B. Hays, Rodney Clapp, and Michael G. Cartwright are some of the essayists.

These highly personal pieces explain not just the ideas of the authors but detail how their encounter with Anabaptism changed their lives. Predictably, one figure looms large: John Howard Yoder and especially his book *The Politics of Jesus*. But Alan and Eleanor Kreider also figure importantly in many stories, because of their promotion of Anabaptism in the British Isles.

Several themes frequently recur. In many instances, Mennonite witness converted these writers to a peace stance. Other motifs

that impressed them include mutual aid, ecclesiology, church as alternative community, Christ-centered understandings of ethics, the intrinsic interrelatedness of theology and practice. More than one contributor notes that Anabaptism holds key insights for living in a post-Christendom world.

Most intriguing are respectful and loving critiques offered by the authors. Writers repeatedly question Mennonites' sectarian tendencies, proclivity to works righteousness, habitual tendency to legalism, confusion and ambivalence about authority and ordination, resistance to explicit theologizing, and a misguided "restitutionist" view of the Radical Reformation.

A theme that arises often is the paltriness of Mennonite worship. Author after author comments on the over-emphasized horizontal orientation of our Sunday morning services and laments the absence of sacramental theology. Stanley Hauerwas calls our worship "rationalistic and aesthetically thin" (37). The writers contend that this liability can contribute to works righteousness: in the absence of appropriate convictions about grace, we rely too much on human efforts. Richard Hays believes that believers' baptism is more faithful to the New Testament but sadly concludes that Anabaptists have not provided a "profound theological framework for understanding baptism" (131). Many of these interlocutors marvel at how we can be sustained by such infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper and limited memorialistic interpretations of its meaning.

This book takes us some distance from sixteenth-century Anabaptism, not just because of the intervening centuries and changed contexts. Our Radical Reformation forebears saw it as their task to persuade others that the Anabaptist perspective was the only Christian approach and that others professing Christian faith ought to join their numbers. Yet this book edited by a Mennonite historian and published by a Mennonite press celebrates our influence on others who have no intention of becoming Mennonite. I am grateful for the kind words of the various contributors, but I wonder whether part of our sense of affirmation grows out of an insecurity that comes of having been marginalized. I have absorbed enough Mennonite humility by now to wonder whether we should rest easy with the admiration these writers offer.

On a practical note, I was grateful for the book's detailed and useful index. More significantly, this irenically ecumenical contribution has the potential to encourage believers of other traditions to pay attention to the riches of Anabaptism, even as it can help reflectively inclined Mennonites deepen understandings and practices of our faith.

About the reviewer

Arthur Paul Boers teaches pastoral theology at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, and is the author of *The Rhythm of God's Grace: Uncovering Morning and Evening Hours of Prayer*.

Book review

John Derksen

Islam: Religion, History and Civilization, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

This readable survey of the religion, history, and civilizational contributions of Islam, written after the events of September 11, 2001, has particular relevance for pastors and churches. Author Seyyed Nasr, a Muslim of Iranian origin who teaches at George Washington University in Washington, DC, depicts Islam in a way that enables Western non-Muslim readers both to learn about Islam and to glimpse the world through Muslim eyes.

A strong introduction sketches the history of Islamic studies in the West and identifies key contributions of Islam to the world. Chapter 1 surveys Islam's geography, its essence, and its inner unity and diversity. Chapter 2 summarizes the private and public roles of religion in Islam and lays out its spiritual foundations in the Qur'an, in commentaries on the Qur'an, in the Prophet Muhammad, and in the exemplary traditions about the prophet (hadith). Chapter 3 sets forth Islam's doctrines and beliefs about God, prophecy and revelation, the angelic world, the human state, men and women, the cosmos, and eschatology. Chapter 4 outlines Islam's legal dimensions (sharia), and its Sufi spiritual dimensions.

Chapter 5 describes Islam's visible practices and institutions: the Five Pillars, the meaning of jihad, Islamic ethics, the family, and economic and political structures. Chapter 6 presents a majestic sweep of Islamic history from its origins to the present. Besides identifying key epochs and players, Nasr draws suggestive connections over large periods of time, such as those between the Seljuks and the Ottomans. Chapter 7 describes the schools of Islamic thought: theology, spiritual metaphysics, and philosophy. The book concludes with reflections on Islam in the contempo-

rary world (chapter 8). While defending his own “traditional and spiritual” perspective, Nasr criticizes both the modernists, with their Western rationalism, and the “fundamentalists,” with their inexcusable violence, for wrongly borrowing un-Islamic tools to achieve “Islamic” ends (184–85).

Although much of the content is standard introductory fare, and although more is needed on Muslim contributions in mathematics and science, the book includes some unique and valuable offerings. With surveys of Islam in black Africa, Southeast Asia, and China, the book’s scope is truly global. The frequent mention of the Shia, Sufis, and Persia points to Nasr’s background and spiritual orientation. His balanced, irenic approach affirms Western non-Muslim scholars who portray Islam with objectivity, accuracy, and sympathy (xv–xvi, 150). Despite strong criticism of Western economic and political influence, his references to Christianity are often sympathetic and his critiques gentle.

Nasr also acknowledges shortcomings within the Muslim community. He admits failures of Uthman, the third caliph, rejects the near hagiography of Muslim heroes displayed by some Muslim writers, and mentions internal debates such as those on Islam’s relation to Confucianism in China (148). However, on the spread of Islam, he highlights the peaceful Sufi propagation and remains silent about brutal conquests. On the forces that hastened the Islamic world’s decline from 1600 to 1900, the book bypasses the Muslim world’s internal decay in favor of exclusive focus on external Western conquest.

This gentle survey of Islam as seen through Muslim eyes is a first-rate introduction. Given the author’s traditional, orthodox, and irenic posture, and his solid understanding of the Western mind, the book builds a bridge to Western readers from the Muslim side. For pastors seeking to help parishioners understand and relate to Muslim neighbors, reading this book is a must. Muslims of a legalistic or narrow-minded bent may also find in this book a refreshing spiritual breeze.

About the reviewer

John Derksen is Assistant Professor of Conflict Resolution Studies at Menno Simons College in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He spent nine years in Egypt and Lebanon.

Book review

Darrel Toews

Seeing the Text: Exegesis for Students of Greek and Hebrew, by Mary H. Schertz and Perry B. Yoder. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.

An ambiguous phrase spoken/heard or written/read in multiple socioreligious contexts lends itself to a variety of possible interpretations. If in certain contexts “it’s so bad” may express admiration, then obviously a foundational knowledge in hermeneutics is required in order to read and interpret the biblical text.

Mary Schertz and Perry Yoder provide readers with a fine milieu in which to move toward developing greater spiritual maturity in both the science and the art of biblical interpretation. Their method is text-centric and promotes an expanding appre-

The authors aim “to enable students to progress from their ability to read a biblical language to making considered judgments about the meaning of the texts and their significance then and now.”

ciation of the biblical languages: “The primary goal of this book is to enable students to progress from their ability to read a biblical language to making considered judgments about the meaning of the texts and their significance then and now” (13).

The authors diligently pursue this aim. Seeing the text means precisely that: half the book is dedicated to guiding students through a carefully stepped process meant to reveal visually the dynamic life of the material.

Having provided tools for establishing the most likely semantic sense of a biblical text, the second half of the book illumines how such texts function in their contexts, which moves students toward appropriate interpretive applications in multiple contexts.

Even if readers fall short in appropriating basic skills in the biblical languages, the second half of this volume provides a solid rehearsal of foundational principles of interpretation. *Seeing the*

Text is an excellent resource for pastors, preachers, and teachers—leaders who have been granted communal authority to guide readings of the canon. The authors encourage students of the Bible to constantly and consistently inquire, search, ask, propose, examine, and evaluate as they develop a topography of the canon, its peaks and valleys.

The authors explore and analyze centripetal versus centrifugal readings and the implications of these approaches. Using the imagery of dominate threads, minor threads, bundles of threads, dangling threads, and background threads, Schertz and Yoder weave a wonderful tapestry in which the big picture informs the individual passage, thus placing the smaller unit in proper perspective. Seeing the text appropriately buttresses our ability to take our place in the world as a people of faith.

The major practical suggestion proposed and illustrated throughout is the ongoing development of a study journal, an expanding set of notes, which forms a rich resource, an honest attempt to own and be owned by the text. By developing a textual-contextual portrayal of and commentary on the text, biblical students will undoubtedly deepen their personal theological outlook and spiritual development toward wholeness.

Despite a couple of explicit concessions to the broader community of scholars, a significant oversight is lack of attention to communal aspects of reading. The multitude of possibilities presented may seem overwhelming at first, but veteran biblical interpreters will recognize that they already practice many of the basic skills, and will surely gain fresh encouragement to build their reading repertory. Furthermore, the authors' joyous and committed involvement with the biblical material is infectious.

Illustrative samples of Hebrew and Greek are consistently provided, and numerous references to a wide variety of extra-biblical resources, including computer software, facilitate continued learning. Two excurses (on the structure of clauses and on Greek and Hebrew word order), interesting notes, a helpful bibliography, and scriptural and subject indices round out *Seeing the Text*.

About the reviewer

Darrel Toews is Pastor of Breslau (Ontario) Mennonite Church.