

Thoughts on Prayer

The Program Staff of
First Presbyterian Church of Evanston

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns.

Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down.

It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

Philippians 4:6-7, The Message

May 3 - May 9, 2010

In preparation for the National Day of Prayer

www.firstpresevanston.org/dayofprayer

Introduction

Why is it so important that you are with God and God alone on the mountain top? It's important because it's the place in which you can listen to the voice of the One who calls you the beloved. To pray is to listen to the One who calls you "my beloved daughter," "my beloved son," "my beloved child." To pray is to let that voice speak to the center of your being, to your guts, and let that voice resound in your whole being.

--Henri Nouwen

This is not a manual on prayer. This is not an academic discussion or a theological viewpoint. These are the personal experiences and stories of how God has welcomed us into his embrace through open and honest prayer.

As we spend this week, and especially Thursday, praying for our communities; we invite you to use this booklet to discover new ways to speak with a God who longs to listen to you. Some of these entries are practical, others emotional; but all are personal testimonies to the power and intimacy that we have found in prayer.

This is not a how-to book, but rather a doorway to lead you in to your own experiences with God. We hope that these daily readings will lead you into a time in which God will speak to you in a real and individual way.

May you be blessed as you seek.

Monday

Developing Consistency in Prayer

By The Rev. Dr. Raymond Hylton

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.

Daniel 6:10

Like Daniel, every believer can have a dynamic personal prayer life. The Bible gives us the keys that we need to develop a powerful prayer life. Scripture is full of examples of men and women who walked with God and used prayer to impact their world, and you can do the same thing through prayer.

However, before praying, consider the following suggestions that I am using to help me establish a meaningful prayer life.

1. **Schedule a regular prayer time.**

Find a time every day to spend in prayer. I am by nature an early morning person. So I schedule my prayers at 5:30 AM. I try to pray with our brothers and sisters at the Korean Fellowship or I pray alone. The important thing is that we should be consistent with a time that works best for us. Daniel prayed three times a day.

2. **Choose a private place to pray.**

A prayer closet could be anywhere as long as it is private. When I was still living in Pennsylvania, I often prayed in my family room. The house was quiet and everyone else was still asleep. But you can use other places such as: your garage, pantry, front porch, or any other creative place where you can get alone with God. Some people pray while driving in their car and others pray while working out or running.

3. **Try to limit distractions.**

Don't pray in the same room where you watch television or are tempted by other activities.

4. **Have a prayer list to guide your prayers.**

You should pray for your family, friends, church, etc. This will ensure that you don't forget important things to pray for. I always use a prayer journal to remind me to pray about the many people and situations going on around me. I never depend on my memory because I tend to forget the details. By using a prayer list or journal, I am able to look back on prayers answered. This is always a faith building experience when I can draw a line through certain things that I have been praying about.

Heavenly Father, teach us more about your ways, your name, your reliability and your power to hear and respond to our prayers. Help us walk by faith and not just by sight.

Amen

Tuesday

Prayer

By the Rev. Dr. Christopher Miller

Prayer is the discovery and re-discovery of the way to access the Kingdom of God as recommended by Jesus. We are advised to be as little children, that only those of us like such as these can enter into God's realm. So prayer is the result of an inclination to return home after working or playing all day outside on our own. It is the rediscovery that after all our efforts and expressions toward independence and self-sufficiency, we need to climb back in God's lap and to be held there safe and secure in God's love.

Hopefully this will feel like our parents' love that claimed and valued us whether we had been good or bad that day. Once there, in the lap of God, we disclose (more than admit) how things are going for us, whether we've had a good day or a bad day. We review how we have handled ourselves in all that the day required of us, and we disclose what we hope will be our good fortune in our next trials and adventures. We experience the gratitude that we are loved, and once again we discover what the disciples experienced when Jesus re-appeared to them, saying, "Peace be with you," that peace which defies our doubts, our inadequacies and our low self-esteem, that peace that passes all understanding.

Then in a very un-intellectual way, we know again God's love, who we are, and how to trust in goodness amidst great uncertainty.

Such prayer might go something like this:

*My God, so close and powerful,
as one of yours I feel secure in your arms
and safe in your love.
I need to be close to you,
and I want you to help me be the person
you meant for me to be.
Thanks for loving me as I am
even while inspiring me to be more like Jesus.
Show me the way to forgive myself and others
in our struggles to love one another,
even enemies,
and keep me trusting in your
abiding presence.
Thanks again for your love.
Amen.*

Wednesday

Praying through Music

By Natalie Richards

Scripture Reading – Psalm 25

It may come as no surprise to you that some of my most honest and heartfelt prayer times have been when alone, seated on the piano bench. There is something about playing and singing songs which glorify our majestic God that bring to mind our own insignificance and smallness. This simple fact alone often leads me to prayer. I have often been so moved by a lyric that I will stop in the middle of a song and let the outpour of prayer flow to our Lord.

While it's one thing to enter prayer as I'm moved, I don't always wait for the music or lyrics to move me. Sometimes I will use them to begin a prayer time, as a launching pad, especially in desert times when I am feeling spiritually dry. The first verse of the hymn "Take my life" (lyrics by Frances Ridley Havergal, 1874) often leads me to respond to Christ in prayer.

*Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days;
Let them flow in ceaseless praise,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

Praying through music wasn't always obvious to me even though I have always been passionate about music. It wasn't until I encountered Taizé worship services, that I truly was able to pray through music. (That concept, in turn, bled over into all other genres of music in time.) Taizé is meditative sung prayer. Simple phrases are sung repetitively until they become embedded in your soul. Through the simplicity of song, deep parts of us are revealed and opened in prayer, but more importantly it allows us an opportunity to hear God differently. A Taizé worship service was one of the first times I was able to truly listen to God. Still today, in spoken prayer, I struggle with listening. I have to deliberately remind myself not to do all of the talking! Within music, the listening comes naturally for me.

The Taizé song, *In te Confido*, has dwelled in me through the years. The refrain is simply "Christ of compassion, Lord God, I trust you" with verse lyrics drawn from Psalm 25 – known as a Psalm of David & prayer for guidance and protection. As you read the psalm, you can gather that it is a similar plea for the constant presence of God in our lives that would lead to a life of ceaseless praise. *Lead me in Your truth and teach me O Lord. For You are the God of my salvation; in You I hope all day long.*

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for creating music that draws us closer to You even when we don't have the words or knowledge to do so ourselves. We ask that You would speak to us through these songs so that our lives would reflect a life of ceaseless praise to You. We pray in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thursday

Living Prayer

By Caryl Weinberg

I had lived in Ethiopia only a few months when I began to hear stories from the brutal communist era, of people put in jail because of their faith in Christ; of primary school students beaten because they would not deny the existence of God; of members of a local choir killed as they worshipped the Lord; of local house church groups meeting by the river in the middle of the night to hide the 'noise' of their prayers and singing.

At the same time, I saw these same people and the prayer life that was woven through the very fabric of their existence. Before another word was uttered in the morning, a household of believers prayed together and said the Lords prayer. Before a sip of coffee was taken, thanks were given for God's provision. A visitor came and before they sat, they said a prayer for the family and household. Another visitor came to pray: the doors and windows were shut, pieces of worn cardboard passed around for everyone to kneel on, so that they might pray without ceasing for hours on end on a hard mud floor. Before each meal, each meeting, and before going to bed at night, prayers were said. Holidays and important events were ushered in by prayer beginning at midnight the morning of the special day – ending as the darkness left, and dawn broke.

And, I saw that Ethiopians were very conscious of the use of their bodies in prayer. One never prayed from a place of comfort. If you were sitting and called on to pray, you stood. Or you might kneel, particularly when asking something of God. Even in death as people uttered perhaps their last prayer on this earth, they asked those around them to lift them up so that they at least were sitting, and not lying in bed.

Ethiopians had a keen sense of both the holiness of the Almighty God, and the assurance of God's living presence deep within each of them. They knew that the God of the universe was all powerful, and yet deeply merciful and caring. They knew that whether a pastor in a church, or a poor widow with nothing to her name, that God heard every prayer spoken and unspoken, said in joy or in sadness, contentment or in need. And they knew and believed with all their hearts that He would answer – not because they deserve it or earned it – but because He loved them and cared for them. They were the epitome of what I believe Jesus meant when he said that we don't "live by bread alone – but by every word that comes from the mouth of God". They completely put their trust in Him and so lived in perfect peace – no matter their life situation - through their life conversation of prayer.

God used Ethiopians to introduce me to a new way of prayer – a life lived by prayer. I pray that each of us might experience prayer as a living part of who we are and all we do, woven into the fabric of our very lives.

*Oh Lord, Oh Lord, we know you love us and will never leave us. And we praise you for that.
Please Lord, we ask that you send our next meal,
and give you thanks that it will be all we need.*

*Yeari tiyatay, Yeari tiyatay. Yi Soomi azay.
Wopsation petmaake.
God is Lord, God is Lord. His name is great. Glory to Him.*

Friday

Learning to Pray

By Connie Floyd

I was raised in a Christian family. My Dad was an elder, my mom was a Sunday school teacher. We went to church every Sunday and all eight of us sang in the choir. Prayer in our home was limited to a rote grace recited before dinner and a memorized prayer at bedtime. The siblings would race through the prayer to see who could finish first.

Jump now to college years where I met Mardi in the college choir. She turned out to be a “born again Christian.” I had only a vague idea of what that meant. In breaks of choir practice, we planned a trip to Europe the summer after our Junior year. Mardi wanted to go to a place in Switzerland called L’Abri (French for *the shelter*), where all kinds of students would come, bringing their questions of faith to Francis and Edith Schaeffer. Our plan was to meet in Switzerland and then begin our traveling. God had another plan for me.

When I arrived at L’Abri, I quickly realized I had a lot to learn about Christianity. So we scrapped our travel plans and stayed there all summer. I was most uncomfortable when people would pray, because I really didn’t know how to pray.

In the middle of my time at L’Abri, an announcement was made one morning that all activities and meals would be cancelled in order that the entire community could participate in a day of prayer and fasting to bring before God an issue having to do with visas and the Swiss government. I couldn’t imagine how I would survive a whole day with no food, no talking, just a Bible to read.

As the day went on, I slowly became aware of God’s presence and was truly humbled. I asked God to show me where I needed to make changes in my life. This was the first time I really prayed. I had a lot more to learn about God and the power of prayer, but I will always remember that day on a Swiss hillside, when I learned to pray.

Sometimes, when we don’t know where to begin, praying scripture can help us find our way. I invite you to use this passage as you pray today.

“Be still and know that I am God.”

Psalm 46:10

Saturday

Honest Prayer

By Jason Burton

I don't remember much from my childhood Sunday School classes, but I do remember one class in which I was taught how to pray. The lesson focused little on what to pray, and more on the importance of having your eyes closed and your hands folded. While the practice, particularly of folding hands to pray, hasn't always stuck with me, the memory of that lesson always has. The idea that there was a proper way to pray may have damaged my prayer life a bit, paralyzing me with fear that God wouldn't hear me if I didn't assume the correct position.

These days I spend time, almost weekly, teaching teenagers how to pray. Sometimes this means telling them not to text or talk to each other while we're praying as a group, but more often than not it's assuring them that they can be themselves before God. When you're praying with a group of teenagers, funny things get said, funny things happen, strange things get prayed for, and I often find students looking to their leaders to see if they've been shocked by the irreverence. More often than not, rather than a look of stern rebuke, they find their leaders un-phased, and usually laughing along.

Jesus didn't bring a message that "anything goes" when it comes to prayer; He actually had quite a lot to say about it. The guidelines Jesus offers though focus more on attitudes and pretenses than rules about what to do with your hands.

In Matthew 6:5 – 15 Jesus tells his followers not to be like the hypocrites who make a show of how "correctly" they know how to pray, but to pray in an attitude of honesty with God, because, as he says in verse 8, God already knows what's really on your mind anyway!

There's a great scene in the movie "The Apostle" in which Sonny, a preacher played by Robert Duvall, is shown praying loudly and angrily in his room – literally yelling at God about the hardships he's been enduring. It's initially shocking that anyone would say these things to God, or use that tone with God, particularly a preacher, but that's exactly how we should pray – without pretense. God is not shocked when we're angry, sad, or doubting – he already knows. Prayer is not meant to inform God of things He wasn't aware of, it's meant to give us an opportunity to feel heard, and loved, and forgiven right where we're at. So today I would encourage you, if you have a way you normally pray, to try and do it a little differently – let go of any formalities you might be in the habit of using, and get straight to what's on your heart and your mind. God won't be shocked – He already knows.

Each day of this prayer journal ends with a written prayer for you to pray. Since this entry is about praying honestly and without pretense, the space below is blank for you to write in your own prayer.

Sunday

Answered Prayer

By Melody Vogel

When I was eight years old, I really wanted a piano. When I would visit friends, I could often be found picking out little tunes on their basement pianos or bedrooms keyboards. I had a tiny keyboard that my parents had given me as a birthday gift a few years before, but as I grew, my fingers became too large for the miniscule keys and my ears longed for more than the one and half octaves the little keyboard could provide.

My parents were thrilled that I was showing an interest in music, but we were also a large family trying to live on a small town pastor's salary; so a piano was not in the family budget. I saw some in the classifieds, but couldn't imagine how long it would take me to save up the few hundred dollars that was being asked. I was discouraged and frustrated.

I remember my mom coming into my room to pray with me one night. She said that God always gives us what we need; but that he often gives us what we want, if we will learn to use it for His glory. She prayed for me and encouraged me to pray. I also remember being skeptical. How would God provide me with a piano? Would I find an envelope full of money under my pillow one night, like an overly generous tooth fairy? Would a piano 'accidentally' fall off a moving truck as it drove by our house? I had my doubts, but prayer was the only option I currently had, so pray I did.

A few weeks later, after church, a couple in our congregation approached my parents and asked if we might have use for an old piano that was gathering dust in their basement. Within a month I had gone from hopelessly praying for an instrument to taking lessons on my very own piano.

I went on to cultivate a deep love of music, but more than that; I grew to understand that God does not only answer our prayers through cosmic acts, but more often through his faithful people. By using a member of my church family, God was not only giving me my heart's desire, but teaching me to depend on the community that he had placed me in. He was also using my need to invite others to be generous with their material possessions.

Prayer is not meant to be a solitary act; at its most intimate it remains a dialogue between you and God. In Acts 2:42-47, we see a beautiful picture of how God uses community to care for His people. We each must become vulnerable through sharing our needs, which cultivates the opportunity for us to share generously the blessings that God has given us. What an amazing and personal God we serve, that He often supplies our need through friends and neighbors seated right beside us!

Lord, design us to reflect your glory as we rebuild your Church. Fashion our ears to hear new ideas. Shape our hearts to appreciate other's creativity and insight. Form our eyes to see Jesus in each other. May we work together with love and care, ever mindful that the Spirit, not the structure, is the essence of the design. May we come together as a family of one to be guided by the Father, Holy Spirit and Son.
Amen.

Contributors

Raymond Hylton, Senior Pastor

Ray was born in Kingston, Jamaica. He came to America in 1981 and married Judith, his childhood sweetheart, in 1983; they have three children. Ray has been the senior pastor at First Pres for a little over five months. In his free-time he enjoys reading, running, basketball, playing guitar, writing and watching movies.

Christopher Miller, Director of the Counseling Center

Christopher has been associated with The Counseling Center for over 20 years. He acquired his M.Div. and Doctor of Ministry in Pastoral Counseling at Chicago Theological Seminary. Dr. Miller is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and a Fellow in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. He is married and has two adult daughters.

Natalie Richards, Worship Coordinator & Contemporary Music Director

Natalie has been in her current role since January 2008; however, she first came to the church as Program Assistant to Worship in October 2005. She grew up in the beautiful UP (Upper Peninsula of Michigan), which meant long and snowy winters, but her best memories are of the easy, long summer days and swimming in the chilly Lake Superior.

Caryl Weinberg, Director of Missions

Caryl began her career in nursing, working at Rush University Medical Center for 16 years. She left nursing to become a PC(USA) Mission Co-Worker, which included community health in rural Ethiopia and serving as the Regional AIDS Consultant, Central/West Africa. Caryl came on staff at First Pres three years ago, after spending time as Liaison for African Women's Concerns at the Louisville, PC (USA) offices. Caryl sits on the Boards of the Medical Benevolence Foundation and the Family Life Development Center; and is an active volunteer at Ten Thousand Villages in Evanston.

Connie Floyd, Director of Children's Ministries

A year after her first visit to L'Abri, Connie traveled there again with her friend Bill, and they became engaged on that same Swill hillside. Connie and Bill joined First Pres in 1973, when their daughter Karen was 2 weeks old. They raised Karen and their son Daniel in this church. Connie has been on staff as the Director of Children's Ministries for 25 years.

Jason Burton, Director of Youth Ministries

Jason just finished his first year as Director of Youth Ministries at First Pres. He was formerly the youth director at First Presbyterian Church of Durango, CO and has also been an CAD Operator and Book-keeper. In his free time Jason enjoys hanging out with his six year old daughter Linnea, reading, and playing guitar & piano.

Melody Vogel, Coordinator of Adult Discipleship & Communications; Program Assistant to Missions

Melody grew up in a small town, nestled in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon. After studying music at the University of Oregon, she moved to Chicago to figure out what was next. After working as a teacher for a few years, Melody began to feel a call to full-time ministry and came on staff at First Pres in 2008. Melody enjoys spending her free-time reading, writing and baking all sorts of gluten free goodies.

Personal Reflections

*When a
Christian shuns
fellowship with
other Christians,
the devil smiles.
When he stops
studying the
Bible, the devil
laughs.
When he stops
praying, the devil
shouts for joy.
Corrie Ten Boom*

*In prayer it is better
to have a heart
without words than
words without a
heart.
John Bunyan*

Hebrews 4:16

So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it.