

Practicing Prayer on Our Resurrection Walk

Session 1 – What Is Prayer?

With this bulletin cover essay, we begin a new series, on practicing prayer. The Book of Common Prayer defines prayer as “responding to God, by thought and by deed, with or without words” (p. 856). That may be a surprising definition. The seventeenth century French comedy, *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, features a pompous man who is elated when he is told that he has “been speaking prose all my life.” The Prayer Book definition of prayer tells us that (surprise!) we – indeed everybody – have been practicing prayer all our lives. Mostly, we’re just not aware of it and therefore don’t do it very well. This series aims to help. Our exploration of what the Prayer Book definition of prayer means will not be systematic or complete. It will be a sampling of all the ways we can pray, with suggestions of how we might do so more rewardingly. Each Sunday in the 9:00 class we will, as usual, delve more deeply into the week’s subject; all are invited to come, learn and share.

Why we tend to think of prayer narrowly. Most of us, when we think of prayer, think of the collects we say in church, and those are indeed an important form of prayer. We also think of “set prayers,” like the Lord’s Prayer or grace at meal times. And we may think of “list prayers” – the stuff some of us present to God, wondering why God so seldom seems to answer us. All these are important forms of prayer, but all have decided limitations. They set us up to think of God as a “thing” apart from us. Prayer to such a God becomes a matter of sending spiritual emails to this separate being, whose mailbox alas seems often to be full. Our prayer is too small because our conception of God is too small. Prayer becomes us acting and God responding – or often not responding.

Prayer as our response to God. So the Prayer Book definition opens our understanding of prayer by opening our understanding of God. The God of Trinity is not a “thing” apart, but a God active and alive in everything all around us and everything within us; active all the time. While God is other and transcendent, God is also immanent and incarnate; God is Spirit, praying always (as St. Paul reminds us) within us, “with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). Our job, then, is to tap into that constant stream of internal thoughts and yearnings, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears; to recognize in them God’s Spirit calling to us, and then to respond in a way that establishes a living dialogue with God. St. Augustine, a great fourth century theologian, famously wrote: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Perhaps Augustine’s most often quoted phrase, it captures something that resonates deep within the human person. Restlessness is that desire to be filled and fulfilled. We all have it.

Words of encouragement. There are many ways to establish such a prayer relationship. Different ways work for different people. A good rule is to “pray as you can, not as you should.” A famous Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsay, said that sometimes the best he could do was to “want to pray,” or “want to want to pray.” The God of prayer is our friend, not an enemy. We live into his friendship as we explore ways to pray. This is all part of our baptismal journey of “practicing resurrection.”

More wise words on prayer.

The way to learn to pray is to pray. – *Thomas Merton*

I do not spend a lot of time praying. But I do spend a lot of time getting ready to pray. – *Bishop Michael Ramsay*

Prayer requires “availability.” When you are “available” your heart and mind are open to the motions of the Spirit who moves within the depths of your being, and who also meets you through the words and presence of others and the circumstances of our life. – *Gabriel Marcel*

All prayer, and indeed the desire to pray, flows from the same divine source and leads us deeper into the mystery we call God, which is also the mystery of who we, in grace and truth, are called to be. Through prayer our consciousness is transformed and conformed to the mind of Christ, and we begin to see and act as Christ in us sees and acts. – *Bishop Frank Griswold*