

## Leaders Pray with the Assembly

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I wonder what it was that prompted the disciples' request. Had they watched Jesus praying, as was his custom, in a place apart and then seen him come back somehow changed—more refreshed, more serene, more focused, more disturbed? Had they overheard Jesus praying—the intimate conversation, the wrestling and struggle, the thanksgiving and praise, the intercessions? Had they remembered some admonition or invitation to pray? Did their own spirits feel dry and empty? Did they know some longing deep inside for a closer communion with the one Jesus called *Abba*? Was there in them some joy or anguish that needed to be offered to God? “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1).

Evelyn Underhill, the late Anglican spiritual writer, has suggested that the disciples may well have been disappointed in Jesus' response. What we have come to call “The Lord's Prayer” seemed to link together seven phrases that would have been already well known to the disciples, phrases that were part of Jewish prayer and had their roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. “It is,” she says, “as if we went to a saint and asked him to teach us to pray, and he replied by reciting the collect for Quinquagesima Sunday. We can imagine the disappointment of the disciples—‘We knew all this before!’”<sup>1</sup>

If even Jesus couldn't come up with a new teaching on prayer, what can you expect from me? Talking about prayer is always difficult. It is hard for me because I am still learning, and just when I think I have “got it,” *it* changes, or I do. It's hard in a setting like this, because I believe talk about prayer, like prayer itself, ought not to be a one-way conversation because all of us who have been created for communion with God and infused with the spirit of the risen Christ in baptism know about prayer. And surely there is great richness in this group of people so steeped in the church's liturgy and song. It's hard to talk about prayer because prayer is a very complex thing—understood on one end of a spectrum as encompassing all of the Christian's life and on the other end, a very specific thing that we do. But mostly, it's hard because to talk about

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<sup>1</sup>Evelyn Underhill, *Abba*, comp. Roger L. Roberts (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1982), 7–8.

prayer is to presume to talk about a mystery. I regret I didn't understand this back in the days when I was a parish deaconess teaching confirmation class. I think some of the saddest sessions I had with my students were about prayer. I thought I could teach them what it was and how it worked and how to do it properly.

Now I know my words can neither define nor hold this mystery. At best my words can begin to describe and point to this mystery. They can give witness to the wisdom drawn from the experience of God's people through the ages and around the world, and by God's grace, perhaps my words can invite others to enter more deeply into this mystery we call prayer. It is with a sense of humility that I offer these words to you, and I await the words you might give in response.

*Prayer, the Heart's True Home:  
A Few Beginning, Perhaps Elementary Words*

Prayer begins in the heart of God. God, the scriptures tell us, created human beings for relationship with God, and God desires communion and communication with us. That is the beginning of prayer.

Everybody prays [Frederick Buechner writes in *Wishful Thinking*] whether he thinks of it as praying or not. The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad. The ah-h-h-h! that sometimes floats up out of you as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the sky-rocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds you use for sighing with over your own life. These are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to yourself but to something even more familiar than yourself and even more strange than the world.<sup>2</sup>

St. Augustine said it this way: "You have made us for yourself [O God], and our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>3</sup> The capacity is there whether we know it or not, whether we use it or not. If prayer begins with the creating breath of God, it is the spirit of the risen Christ, breathed on us and in us in baptism, that empowers us Christians to enter into the encounter and relationship with God that is prayer, that mysterious encounter or relationship between God and us.

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<sup>2</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking—A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 70.

<sup>3</sup>*Confessions* I.1.

I have found it a helpful exercise, and you might, too, to think about human relationships and all that goes into their health and maintenance. From our human relationships we begin to get some clues also to our prayer. In our human relationships we want to spend time with others and know them and not just read about them or hear about them from others. There is need for clear and frequent communication that involves listening and speaking and self-revelation in words and actions. There needs to be freedom and mutual commitment. An intimate relationship can bring comfort, but it can also be unsettling. A friend can draw out of us things we didn't know were there—gifts and talents, feelings and memories, things to celebrate. A close relationship can also expose our shadow side—traits that need to be transformed, faults that need to be forgiven, hurts that need to be healed. A healthy relationship includes spontaneity and surprise as well as ritual and tradition. Sometimes when communication in a relationship gets muddled, someone else can help to sort it out. If people are to grow in a relationship they need to be deliberate and intentional about doing those things that create closeness and intimacy. Sometimes there is silence, being together just beyond words, images, and actions. Of course, we dare not press the limits of what this comparison can hold, but the comparison can give us helpful clues. In the encounter that is prayer, God is the initiator, desiring relationship with us, relentlessly pursuing us and giving us what we need to respond. In her book *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Marjorie Thompson, a Presbyterian minister, teacher, and spiritual guide, suggests that “our real task in prayer is to attune ourselves to the conversation already going on deep in our hearts.”<sup>4</sup>

To talk about prayer this way is risky. It can easily slip into a kind of privatized spirituality that is all too common in our culture and even our churches today. Here, of all places, there is little need to elaborate on those dangers. You know well the challenges presented by the patterns of spirituality Bradley Hanson calls “Spiritual Shoppers” and “Independent Seekers.”<sup>5</sup> The prayer that is rooted in baptism is not just about God’s relationship with a “me,” but it is about God’s relationship with an “us.” The conversation into which prayer seeks to tune is also a conversation

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<sup>4</sup>Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 31.

<sup>5</sup>Bradley Hanson, *A Graceful Life: Lutheran Spirituality for Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2000), 6–7.

already going on in our corporate heart. Still there is a personal—not private, but personal—dimension to that encounter.

The prayer that begins in God calls to the working of the risen Christ in us. Our first response is amazement and wonder—that the God of all creation would enter into relationship with me, sinner that I am, and with us, with all our diversity, dissension, and failings and that the God of all creation would welcome and invite the outpouring of our heart in praise and thanks, in confession and lament, in intercession and petition. When we realize this, we join with those early disciples—Lord, teach us to pray.

### *What Kind of Prayer Is This?*

Praying with the assembly doesn't happen only when the assembly is assembled. "Let [the one] who is not in community beware of being alone." And "let [the one] who cannot be alone beware of being in community," cautioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>6</sup> He understood that our Christian life required a balance and an interplay between solitude and community. Healthy prayer also requires balance and interplay between prayer together and prayer alone.

As we learn more about human personality and personal preferences, we know that some of us are more inclined by our nature to pray in the company of other Christians. And such a person might wonder how anyone could not be attracted to liturgies such as we experience here or to groups where people pray together and support and encourage each other's lives of prayer. But others of us are by nature more comfortable praying alone. And such a person might wonder how anyone could not be drawn to the honest intimacy of personal communion with God or the depth of praying the Psalms slowly and consciously connected with God's people of every time and place. Wise spiritual counsel says we need both. Henri Nouwen puts it this way:

Without some form of community, individual prayer cannot be born or developed. Communal and individual prayer belong together as two folded hands. Without community, individual prayer easily degenerates into egocentric and eccentric behavior, but without individual prayer, the prayer of the community quickly

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<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 77.

becomes a meaningless routine. Individual and community prayer cannot be separated without harm.<sup>7</sup>

When we find ourselves drawn more to one, we do well to urge ourselves in the other direction to find the richness that comes from the balance and to allow our prayers alone to be tempered by our prayers together and our prayers together to be enriched by our prayers alone.

Somehow talking about prayer together versus prayer alone isn't enough. Some have made a distinction between "cathedral prayer" and "monastic prayer." I have found Paul Bradshaw's development of this in a little book called *Two Ways of Praying* especially helpful.<sup>8</sup> This is probably familiar territory for many of you, but please allow me a brief recap as I understand it.

The distinction is not based so much on the place—cathedral or monastery—as on the external forms of the worship and "more importantly" Bradshaw says, "on the significant differences of the inner spirit and understanding of prayer expressed by those divergent forms."<sup>9</sup>

The prototypes are found in the daily worship among Christians in the fourth century. The detail on "cathedral worship" is drawn from the *Itinerarium* of Egeria, a nun who visited Jerusalem and kept a travel diary to share with the folks back home, perhaps in France or Spain. A monk named John Cassian wrote about the practices of Egyptian monasticism giving the detail for "monastic prayer."

In both types people gathered several times during the day for prayer, including scripture readings and psalms. On the surface, Bradshaw says, there are many similarities, but in fact there are some profound contrasts. He outlines five. I believe these three are most helpful for our discussion:

First, "cathedral" prayer is essentially communal. It is something the whole congregation does. For example, the participants express corporate praise in hymns sung together and psalms sung together or with congregational refrains. They make a communal response to the petitions announced by the deacon. It is not, Bradshaw says, just a prayer group. It is the church at prayer. Second, "monastic prayer" while it might appear communal is really an individual activity the monks could carry out

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<sup>7</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, quoted in *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, ed. Robert Durback (New York: Image Books-Doubleday, 1997), 132.

<sup>8</sup>Paul F. Bradshaw, *Two Ways of Praying* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

together in choir or alone in their cells. Coming together allowed for mutual encouragement, supervision, and discipline. Third, praise and intercession are at the heart of “cathedral” prayer. A few psalms and canticles were repeated day after day. Those gathered understand that they participated in the prayer of Christ, “offering the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God on behalf of all creation and interceding for the salvation of the world.” Their prayer was outward looking, for the sake of others.<sup>10</sup>

“Monastic” prayer, Bradshaw says, was more pedagogical or formational in its intent. It was inward looking, aimed at the spiritual growth of the participant. The whole psalter was used over the course of time. There was extended time for meditation, allowing for the real prayer to take place not so much in the psalms and the reading but in the spaces between them. The “monastic” tradition interpreted the injunction to “pray without ceasing” by seeking to spend as much time as possible in prayer. In the “cathedral” tradition the injunction was understood as meaning that all of life should become a prayer. That understanding was reinforced by punctuating the day with times of prayer. As you may know, these two strands did not remain pure but became intermingled in both cathedral and monastery. And surely we see elements of both in our liturgies and in the resources available for our prayer—whether together or alone.

Many things that were true in the fourth century changed through time until we come to our day. You can spin out some of the realities. In an urban, industrialized culture, the rhythm of people’s lives is much different. People can read and own Bibles, and still there is extreme biblical illiteracy. The Reformation gave the word and preaching—as well as the congregation’s reflecting on it—a more central place in worship. At least in our part of the world, there has been rampant growth in individualism and a sense that all we do in life is voluntary. And we can add to that the desire that everything be relevant, makes sense, and can be accomplished in a prescribed period of time—usually short. Families don’t eat meals together, and people look for information and truth not in books but on television screens and computer monitors. There is among people a great spiritual hunger and a fascination with the mystical. Young people, we are told, have difficulty making commitments, but they want their lives to have meaning. They want to make a difference. This isn’t the fourth century any more. Some of the changes we may celebrate and

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 18–21.

others we regret. But this is our world. We cannot go back to another time. How do we pray with the assembly given all this?

I still find the distinction between “cathedral” and “monastic” helpful because our prayer needs, it seems to me, to include both. It isn’t always easy to tell which is which. Bradshaw points out that something may look “cathedral” in form but really be “monastic” in function and vice versa. Both traditions have something to offer to a healthy spiritual life. Being able to make the distinction between these two types can be helpful for those who lead and plan and teach so that the balance can be there. I think it can also help in sorting out the expectations and longings of people regarding worship and prayer.

If it is true that we need both prayer alone and prayer together and that we also need “cathedral” and “monastic” prayer for a healthy spiritual life, then perhaps it is helpful to lay out a kind of grid with four quadrants to take stock and ensure we have a healthy diet. Both our prayers alone and our prayers together can have both “cathedral” and “monastic” dimensions.

When I was in school, we worked with the four basic food groups for a balanced diet. I read recently someone thought the four basic food groups were ice cream, candy, cakes, and really big cakes. You remember the four food groups—meat, dairy, grain, and fruit and vegetable. We were taught that in order to get a balanced diet, we needed to be sure we ate foods from each group every day. Now we have a more complex system—the food pyramid with five food groups not all created equal. We are told, for example, we should each day have five or six servings from the group of “bread, cereal, rice, and pasta” which forms the base of the pyramid. There are fewer servings suggested for the other groups as you go up the pyramid—“fruit” or “vegetables,” and “milk, yogurt, and cheese” or “meat poultry, fish, beans, eggs and nuts.” Finally you get to the top where oils, sugars, etc., are to be taken only sparingly. I suspect our healthy prayer diet is more like the food pyramid than like the four basic food groups. If we work with the pyramid image, we might debate what forms the base. What do we need more than anything else? What do we need more of? What is foundational?

Some would suggest it is the “cathedral,” the corporate prayer of the assembly gathered that takes precedence. Prayer, after all, begins with God, and we can be sure God is present when the assembly gathers around word and sacrament. That presence of God calls forth from us praise and thanksgiving, joined with the whole creation. That presence also evokes from us confession and lament: “We confess that we are in bondage to

sin ...”—“we,” not just a collection of individuals, but also we together as the church, as humanity. That presence draws our heart to the heart of God, who longs for the wholeness and salvation of the whole creation and so to our petitions and intercessions. Surely such prayer is foundational, and all the others flow from it and are nourished by it.

Others would make a case for the need for many servings of prayer alone, meditating on the word, going deeply, allowing the Holy Spirit to teach and form. Maybe you recall the conversation recounted by Henry Horn nearly thirty years ago in his book *Worship in Crisis*. He was admiring the ability a very dear Quaker friend and his community had “to listen and to respond to the prompting of the Spirit” in their meetings. Horn said that practice seemed to lie “just this side of heaven,” because he needed, he said “all sorts of crutches to pull me out of myself and into a common concern.” The friend responded that something was happening to this gift, and many meetings were setting up evangelical services not unlike those of other Protestants. As they talked further, Horn learned that what was happening was a deterioration of their disciplines of scripture reading and prayer at home. They had once come to meeting out of the context of their living the scriptures, teaching them to their children and praying. “The meeting merely gathered up what those, prepared by that context, were led to say within a corporate context.” Without the preparatory context, “there is little from which the Spirit can speak. Rigid formalism takes over.”<sup>11</sup> If the people who assemble are not already on a daily basis meditating on the word, praying for one another, opening themselves to the Spirit’s teaching, then the prayers of the assembly will be impoverished.

The “monastic” type of prayer together also has a place. Hear Kathleen Norris from *Dakota*.

One of the first things I noticed on my longer retreats, when I was with the monks in choir four or five times a day for a week or more, was how like an exercise class the liturgy seemed. It was sometimes difficult to rise early for morning office; at other times during the day it seemed tedious to be going back to church, but knowing that the others would be there made all the difference. Once there, the benefits were tangible, and I usually wondered how I could have wished to be anywhere else. When I compared all this to an aerobics class, a monk said, “That’s exactly right.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Henry E. Horn, *Worship in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 107.

<sup>12</sup>Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1993), 216.



I can and sometimes do aerobic exercises alone, but there is something to be said for the group discipline, for the encouragement others give me, and for what I can learn from them. So, too, with our prayer.

And finally, “cathedral” prayer alone. To some this might seem at first glance an oxymoron. Joseph Cardinal Bernadin in the two months before his death wrote a beautiful witness offered to us in a little book of reflections, *The Gift of Peace*. In “An Aside: The Importance of Prayer,” he tells of his promise to God to give the first hour of the day to prayer. When he made the promise, he said he wasn’t sure he could keep it, but he reported that he had for over twenty years. He described what he did during that hour, and among the parts of that prayer was this:

I pray some of the Liturgy of the Hours. For me, that’s a very important prayer. It’s a prayer of the Church, and I feel connected with all the people, especially clerics and religious, who are reciting or praying the Liturgy of the Hours throughout the world. And so it gives me not only the feeling but also the conviction that I’m part of something that is much greater.<sup>13</sup>

I’m not exactly sure what the prayer pyramid might look like or what number and size of servings from each group might be best for a balanced diet. I suspect what is a healthy diet for one might not be the best for another. But of this I am quite sure: the variety needs to be there. And all our praying is linked one way or another to our service in the world—undergirding and sanctifying it.

One task of the leader, it seems to me, is to help people sort out their types of praying and to help provide ways for them to get that necessary balanced diet. I think this means we need to become more comfortable talking about prayer. It means prayer becomes a more frequent topic in our teaching and preaching. It means we pay attention to the praying that is already going on among those who assemble and we help them to name it. It means we stand ready to assist when the request comes: Teach us to pray.

#### *Some Implications for Prayer with the Assembly When It Is Assembled*

What might this say for praying with the assembly when it is assembled? Just a few suggestions and examples. First, the obvious: the corporate nature of prayer needs to be emphasized. The assembly is not a collection of individuals praying, nor is it a “priest” praying on behalf of

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<sup>13</sup>Joseph Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), 98.

all of us. It is the church at prayer, and it is the church at prayer for the sake of the whole world. Our praise is not just for the things God has done lately for the people there, but it is the praise and thanksgiving for all God does from creation onward. Our intercessions and petitions are not just for our needs and for the needs of those near and dear to us, but we pray for the whole people of God and for all people according to their needs—known and unknown to us. We pray for and on behalf of the whole creation, groaning until all that God would birth in it comes to pass. We pray we may be empowered together to take our part in God's activity in the world. And of course, the whole assembly joins in the prayer. It is not a spectator sport.

Here at the Chapel of the Resurrection the assembly is often invited to join in speaking part of the collects. Following the pattern we are accustomed to in the offertory prayer, the person leading begins and the whole congregation joins in. Of course, it is important that the prayer is written in such a way that it can easily be prayed aloud without people stumbling over words or not knowing where to pause for a breath. Speaking the prayer together emphasizes it is *our* prayer, all of us together.

Another practice here at the chapel has been a great gift for us all. In many places, the prayer of the church is written each week by a layperson who serves as assisting minister. Here a few years ago, David and Phyllis Schroeder were asked to gather a team of student to craft the prayers of the church each week. (Dave is a professor in the College of Business and Phyllis is Associate Director of Financial Aid, involved in residential ministry and regular assisting minister in the Sunday worship.) The Prayer Team meets every Sunday to study the lessons for the following week and to talk about the concerns of the campus and the world. They outline the prayers, and then one of the students writes them. The draft is shared with the whole team via e-mail and then finalized by Friday morning. The student who writes the prayers usually reads them when the assembly gathers on Sunday. The prayers can be found each Friday on the chapel page of the Valparaiso University web site. The students take it very seriously. They read the newspapers and watch the news on television and check what's happening on the web. They listen to their peers and pay attention to what is going on around them. They are engaged in Bible study and they pray. They are learning a lot about worship and prayer, and they will be a gift to whatever congregation they one day become part of. The prayers of the people *are* the prayers of the people. They gather the needs and hopes and longings of us all and enable us to pray together.

The connection with the church catholic can be underlined by including prayers for the church in other parts of the world. This connection can also be facilitated by including prayers and music from other cultures and from other time periods and identifying them as such.

The important place given to the lessons and the sermon in our assemblies surely opens us to the “monastic” function of education and formation. But there can also be a more “cathedral” orientation where the sermon can help interpret what we do together in the liturgy. In either case, it seems, a practice like that at Trinity Lutheran Church here in Valparaiso where I am a member is helpful. It is our custom to leave a time of silence after the sermon for reflection and prayer.

For some time, many—perhaps some of you—have tried to reintroduce daily prayer together into the life of parishes. I’m sure I don’t need to convince you of the value—a value I have been pleased to experience for many years here at Valparaiso University with morning prayer each weekday during the school year. But daily prayer has not caught on quickly in parishes, I suspect largely because pastors and other ministers in congregations don’t need to add another responsibility to their already full schedules. Leading morning prayer at 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. just doesn’t seem very attractive after a late night emergency call to the hospital or when the church council meeting went to 11:00 p.m. the night before or when you have responsibility to get the children off to school. And gathering each morning or evening is hard for people whose jobs require travel, who have long commutes to work, or who have complicated family schedules.

Some parishes, like Immanuel Lutheran Church here in Valparaiso, do invite people to daily prayer early in the morning. By reestablishing this ancient pattern of praying together, people are called to remember whose time it is in which they live. They remember that all of their life is prayer. In these prayer services, elements of the daily offices can be used. They can include elements of both the “cathedral” and the “monastic” forms with the traditional hymns and psalms of praise, with intercession, and with scripture or other readings with time for meditation, reflection, and even conversation. In some situations, members of the congregation are remembered in the prayers in rotation so that the entire membership is named over the course of a few months. Postcards are sent to each person remembered. This daily prayer need not be led by the pastor or even someone on the staff. Perhaps the core of the participants can be drawn from among the growing number of retirees in many parishes.

To have such a regular pattern of daily prayer allows those who cannot be physically present to join in. They can use the same form or an adaptation of it. They can join in the same intercessions. They can meditate on the same readings. Helping this happen requires some planning so that those not present can have what they need to join in, through information distributed on Sunday or in a monthly newsletter or by e-mail. And this leads to the next section.

*Some Implications for Prayer with the Assembly When It Is Dispersed*

Perhaps a word about discipline is in order. Again, I invite you to call to mind what you already know. Spiritual disciplines are not about “oughts” and “shoulds.” The discipline of prayer is about thirsts and hungers, about longings and yearnings. It is not rules and regulations imposed from outside ourselves. It is, rather, something that begins deep within, in our core, in our heart where the spirit of the risen Christ has made a home. Marjorie Thompson writes:

We will choose spiritual disciplines only if we have a strong desire to grow... Desire cannot be forced or manufactured; it can only be discovered in freedom. Yet even a little desire can be encouraged to grow stronger through the practice of discipline, like a spark fanned into full flame or a seedling cultivated into full growth.<sup>14</sup>

The disciplines are not the thing. Disciplines are a way we put ourselves at God’s disposal. Again, Marjorie Thompson:

Spiritual disciplines are like garden tools. The best spade and hoe in the world cannot guarantee a good crop. They only make it more likely that growth will be unobstructed. The mystery of maturation lies in the heart of the seed, and the outcome of planting depends largely on the vagaries of weather. Still, tools are important in helping to ensure that planted seeds will bear fruit. Tools can remove stones and roots, aerate the soil, weed and water the garden.

Disciplines like prayer ... have the character of garden tools. They help keep the soil of our love clear of obstruction. They keep us open to the mysterious work of grace in our heart and our world. They enable us not only to receive but to respond to God’s love, which in turn yields the fruits of the Spirit in our lives.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 10.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

It seems to me that we who would lead need first of all to attend to the desires and disciplines in our own lives. Sometimes we must confess that we do not pray as we ought. Sometimes we don't even desire much. And still the Spirit prays for us—in our stead and on our behalf—the Spirit who moves in us and in the assembly of believers in prayer, gathered and scattered. Perhaps it is precisely when we cannot pray that we know most profoundly that prayer is not our work but God's gift. It is only when we know that prayer is a gift that we can enter into the discipline of it.

### *The Discipline of Time*

In Luther's instruction on prayer to his barber, he writes:

It is a good thing to let prayer be the first business of the morning and the last at night. Guard yourself carefully against those false, deluding ideas which tell you, "Wait a little while. I will pray in an hour; first I must attend to this or that." Such thoughts get you away from prayer into other affairs which so hold your attention and involve you that nothing comes of prayer for that day.<sup>16</sup>

Luther goes on to give a response to those who counter that all of life is prayer. I like the way H. A. Williams, English monk of the Community of the Resurrection, puts it:

Setting aside regular times for prayer doesn't of course mean that we are not always in communion with God, or that [God] may not make us aware of it at any time or place.... But because in ... love God sometimes makes us wonderfully aware of [the divine] presence without our inviting ..., that is no reason for us to deny [God] the courtesy of being at home ... on regular occasions and opening the door.<sup>17</sup>

As with all disciplines, it is important that we are realistic about what we are able to do. One who is woefully out of shape physically could not run a marathon but may be able to begin exercising by walking around the block. Two hours of prayer every morning may not be realistic, but ten minutes twice a week may be a manageable place to begin. It is helpful to pay attention to one's personal rhythms. Someone has pointed out that in a rural culture, the day is the more prominent cycle, with animals that need to be tended to daily and with the greater dependence on light and dark.

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<sup>16</sup>Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 18.

<sup>17</sup>H. A. Williams, *The Simplicity of Prayer: A Discussion of the Methods and Results of Christian Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 33.

For a more urban environment, the work week provides the prominent cycle. Taking stock of our rhythms can help us in the discipline of time. Are you “a morning person” or “a night person”? Are there times of the day or of the week that are especially conducive for prayer? Are there times when you would be helped by being more mindful of God’s presence? Are there constraints on your time from the patterns and habits and needs of those you live with?

We could spend the whole length of this institute and more exploring time—how we regard it, how it enslaves us, how scarce it seems, how we might hallow it. I believe that for many of us, tending to the discipline of time is much more than just a prayer technique. It cuts to the heart of our resistance to live within the limit that God placed on human beings in creation. It exposes our idolatrous attempts to step out of our role as creatures to try to be God. The appropriate behavior in relation to time is not to control it, to manage it, to spend it, or to use it. The appropriate response to time is to receive it, as Dorothy Bass has taught me in *Receiving the Day*, one of the best books I have read lately. Time, too, is a gift.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Discipline of Place*

Of course one can pray any place, but many people have found it helpful to have a special place of prayer, a site where they know their time with God will be facilitated. In our lives, it is often hard to find a quiet place, free of many distractions for an extended time of prayer.

You may have a chair, a quiet corner, a room that is your prayer space. You may have things that aid your prayer—candles, cross, icons, pictures, prayer desk. You may find yourself more ready to commune with God when you are outside. You may have a place on your deck or in your garden. There may be a special place in a park or by a river or lake where you go to pray. I grew up on a farm. When I was a child, I watched my mother. She always kept a fishing pole in the chicken house. Often in the afternoon when she would go to gather the eggs, she would take the pole and walk the extra hundred yards to the pond and go fishing or a half hour or so. I know now that was her quiet place apart. It was a place to pray.

Here again one’s own taste and temperament and living arrangement may suggest which kind of place is the best prayer space. Finding a place

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<sup>18</sup>See Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000).

that can be prayerful may be an important step in living out your desire to spend more time with God in prayer.

### *The Discipline of Method*

Once more, that prayer pyramid can be helpful to sort out good methods of praying so that we get a healthy balance. People pray in many different ways. Our prayer is very personal, not private, but personal, shaped by who we are—our personalities, our individual histories, our tastes and preferences. Some methods of prayer will fit better for some people than for others. It is as if each of us has a “mother tongue” or a “primary language” in which we can best communicate with God. In that language, we can best reveal ourselves and best hear God’s “I love you” to us.

When we look at methods of prayer, it is helpful to begin where we are, with the language in which we are most at home. But if we wish to grow, we will be helped by learning other “languages,” or using additional methods. In fact, sometimes when our prayer seems dry, it may be a sign we are outgrowing our present method and are ready to learn another vocabulary to communicate and commune with God. The new may not feel comfortable at first. It is often that way with new behaviors. This suggests we give a new way of praying some time. A discipline is not established in one or two tries but with regular practice. We need some time to get used to them, to integrate them better into ourselves, to let them truly become our own.

Some methods may never become “ours.” We may try them for a while and discover that for us, they don’t facilitate that relationship with God that is prayer. That’s to be expected. What we learn from the experience, though, is God’s tremendous creativity in communicating with all sorts of people in many and varied ways. The goal, of course, is not to try all the new methods or even all the ancient ones. The goal is to put ourselves at God’s disposal, to be receptive to the gift of prayer.

I have already said some things about the kind of prayer alone that is most obviously connected with the church at prayer. There are wonderful resources for this kind of prayer. *For All the Saints* from the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau adapts the ancient offices of morning and evening prayer for a specifically Lutheran audience.<sup>19</sup> It uses the daily

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<sup>19</sup>See *For All the Saints: A Prayer Book For and By the Church*, 4 vols., comp. and ed. Frederick J. Schumacher (Delhi, NY: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1994).

lectionary in *Lutheran Book of Worship* combined with other readings from ancient and modern sources. It is divided into four volumes, making each one portable and the only book you need. (I might say that my own preference is to use the weekly lectionary as the starting place for prayer, but I have heard others who preach regularly say that using the daily lectionary preserves them from the distraction of always thinking about how one might preach on the text.) Phyllis Tickle has done something similar using *The Book of Common Prayer* as the starting place. Her three-volume work is not so compact, but it includes morning prayer (to be prayed between 6:00 and 9:00 a.m.), midday prayer (for a time between 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.), evening prayer (between 5:00 and 8:00 p.m.) and Compline (before retiring). Some of my deaconess sisters treasure this resource. For me, those four times of prayer have been hard to maintain. Other excellent resources come from Liturgy Training Publications. I know *Proclaim Praise: Daily Prayer for Parish and Home*. The Iona community from Scotland has published some fine resources, as has the Taize community. I have found Edward Hays' *Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim* helpful in drawing me to new language and metaphor in my prayer.<sup>20</sup> I am sure there are here many who use resources such as these and find a deep sense of their prayers being joined with the church and find their spirits nourished and nurtured.

Others may find their times of personal prayer less structured and more informal, using more varied methods. Perhaps you practice a meditative reading of the scriptures or other texts, a sort of *lectio divina*. Perhaps you offer free, spontaneous prayers from the heart—praising God and interceding for those, known and unknown, who have special need. Perhaps your prayer is in motion—a sort of dance. Maybe you sing or draw or write your prayer. Perhaps you are silent in God's presence. Maybe your discipline of method includes one or more of a thousand ways of praying. I am sure there are many here who use resources such as these and find their spirits nourished and nurtured, and who know, too, that their prayer is joined with others around the world.

Perhaps there are also some here, and I confess I am sometimes among you, who feel some guilt or shame or embarrassment because you are a leader who finds yourself unable to pray or at least to pray as you feel you ought. Talk of discipline and resources has little meaning. For any who

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<sup>20</sup>Gabe Huck, *Proclaim Praise: Daily Prayer for Parish and Home* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995); Edward M. Hays, *Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim: A Personal Manual for Prayer and Ritual* (Easton, KS: Forest of Peace Books, 1989).