

We've been in a worship series entitled "Taste and See" since the start of the New Year. We've been talking about the practices that feed our soul, connecting us more deeply to the heart of God. Today I want to talk about the practice of prayer. I want to talk honestly with you about how I lost my prayer life, and how I found it again. And part of my motivation for seeking to deepen my prayer life came from today's scripture reading. It's a text that shows us how deeply Jesus needed a prayer life. And if Jesus needed one, I knew I did too. So, I set off on a journey to find a prayer life that made sense to me. And I found it. But more of that later. For now, let's read Mark 1:32-39 [NLT] together.

About 12 years ago something significant shifted in my faith journey. I began to question things that I had believed all my life. It wasn't a comfortable process. At times it felt as if the ground beneath my feet was shaking. What I didn't know then, but know now, is that I was experiencing a season of transition, wandering through the wilderness between the faith I grew up with and the faith I would grow into. That journey is by no means finished, but today I can honestly say that I'm more at peace, more joyful and more excited about my faith journey than I have ever been.

Let me start with some of the shifts I'm referring to. I'll mentioned them briefly here and explain them in more depth in a minute. Three major shifts:

First, my imagination around God changed. I used to think of God as some far-off being in a place called heaven. But I've come to believe that God is everywhere, including within me and you.

Second, I used to think of prayer as my means of changing God's mind, getting God to do what I wanted. But I've come to believe that prayer isn't about changing God; it's about changing me.

Third, I used to think that prayer was all about my talking to God, as if God didn't already know what was on my mind. But I've come to believe that prayer is more about coming awake to God's constant, loving presence.

Richard Rohr is a theologian whose writings have provided guidance on my journey. Watch this video and listen to how Rohr defines this gift we call prayer: https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=rahT4P8rIWc

Prayer as doing all things in conscious union with God who is always around us and within us - that's a definition of prayer that makes sense to me. And that definition has changed how I pray. And that's what I want to focus on today. I want to share with you what my prayer life looks like - not because I think it's the right way or the only way, but because I know so many others who struggle with prayer and I hope that something in my journey might be helpful for you. Here are the four primary practices that make up my prayer life.

First, there's Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer is an ancient practice and pretty much the exact opposite of what my prayer used to be. Centering prayer is consciously dwelling in God's presence in silence, whereas my old prayer life was constant talking at God. I believe that God is always with me, but I'm not always aware of that fact and this practice helps me to remember. The practice itself is incredibly simple. I sit in a guiet place, consciously surrender myself to God and sit in silence. When I get distracted by thoughts, I let them pass by like leaves on a river. And I do that for 10-20 minutes. That's it. Simple. But not easy. I'm so used to "doing" that I find it really hard to simply "be" with God, and that's why this is such a powerful prayer practice. Centering Prayer places God at the center, the sole focus of my attention. I can't explain why or how this practice changes me, but it does. I find myself more peaceful and joyful throughout the day, and more conscious of God's presence in daily life.

My second prayer practice is Reflection on Scripture. I've often heard prayer described as a conversation with God, and this is the way in which that definition makes sense to me. God speaks through Scripture, and I talk back! Sometimes I ask questions of the text. Sometimes I argue with the text. Sometimes the message is perfectly clear, but to be honest the best conversations I have with God are with the texts I don't like or don't understand. That's when we wrestle together, and it's in that wrestling that I find God

shaping my heart and my mind most often. Lately, I've been using the Our Daily Bread app on my phone for this practice. It suggests a reading every day and a devotional thought, and provides a platform for conversation. More often than not I journal what I'm hearing and what I'm learning because it helps me to remember it and practice it.

I'll call my third prayer practice Holding in God's Presence. One of my greatest struggles with prayer had been what's often called "supplication", the practice of praying for the needs of others. Did I really need to ask God to heal the little girl down the street from cancer? Didn't God already know? Doesn't God already care? And what if that little girls dies? Did I not pray right? Did we fail to get enough people to pray? And does God's willingness to heal really depend upon how many pray, or how well?

I shared all those concerns with my spiritual director and he suggested that when I want to pray for someone in need, I simply picture them in my mind and then imagine them in the healing arms of Jesus. And I hold them there for a moment. I don't tell God what the person needs or what God should do. I assume God already knows. Because I believe that all things are connected by God in ways we can't imagine, I believe that when I carry that healing intention in my heart it changes things in ways I'll never understand. I still pray with people in need, and when I do I use the language of traditional supplication, asking for God's healing and comfort, but in my private prayer life I simply hold people in God's presence.

My final prayer practice is Gratitude. Gratitude is, I believe, the most important and powerful prayer of all. It recognizes God as the giver of all good things. It focuses our attention on what we have rather than what we lack. It develops a perspective of abundance out of which flows greater generosity. I don't use a lot of words when I pray these days, but of the words I do prayer they are most words of gratitude. I try to note through things I'm thankful for at the beginning of the day, and three more at the end. And I often use the Daily Examen as a powerful gratitude practice. The more I practice gratitude, the more I find that I have to be grateful for. And the more I find I have to be grateful for, the more joy I find in daily life. I think that if I could only have one prayer practice for the rest of my life it would be the practice of gratitude.

If your prayer life feeds your soul, whatever your prayer life looks like, that's great! But if your prayer life feels stale or if, like me, you're more than a little confused by this mystery called prayer, I'd invite you to try some new practices. You'll find all the resources I've mentioned along with some instructions and accompanying scripture in this week's Daily Readings on the back of your bulletin.

I'd like to close with my favorite passage of Scripture, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. This was Paul's burning desire for the people he loved, and it is my burning desire for you as flock I shepherd and the people I love:

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. – Ephesians 3:16-19

Prayer is the practice that makes those words a reality.