

EFFECTIVE GOD-CENTERED PRAYER

A devotional guide to prayer by Steve Moorey

You've heard the saying, "Let go and let God." Though often used as a glib cliché, in its best light this concept can be a very effective means in becoming "coworkers with God." It is my hope that my reflections here will help us in exploring the wonders of what I would label "Effective God-Centered Prayer."

In recent months I've been struck by the words in Psalm 46 where God says, "Be still and know that I am God..." We are so busy in our world. At times we are like a group of children fighting over the last cookie. We fear that we won't get what we deserve or that someone is going to get something more or better than we do. We grasp, we fear and we contrive, putting all of our energy into a quest for security. The media informs us we "should" get everything that we are "entitled" to. We can become so obsessed with projects and asking for the one thing we have in mind that there is no room for the creative and enlightening Spirit to breathe into us the true breath of life.

It's not unusual for me to come to prayer with a lot on my mind. I run to God and want to drop off my agenda as quickly as I can so that I can get on to "doing the work of God." I can get so caught up in a flurry of activity and business that I forget the lessons of Elijah in I Kings 19. He was sitting in a cave awaiting God's answer. He too felt that he had a pretty important agenda. Queen Jezebel had just sworn to put him to a violent death in 24 hours. After Elijah poured out his woes to God a strong and terrible wind came, then an earthquake, then a fire, but God was not in any of them. Then came a still small voice. (Other versions say "a gentle whisper" – NIV or the one I really like, "the sound of sheer silence." – NRSV).

Before God's voice could be heard, all else had to be quieted. Hebrews chapter 4 tells us that there "remains a rest for the people of God..." and then exhorts us to labor or "make every effort to enter into that rest." The "rest" is the place where God speaks and is actually heard. It is the place where the word of God, held within the hearts of the faithful, is fully trusted. There's an old song called "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it for me." This idea can be taken to extremes, but it is possible to discern or understand God's word in our hearts. Our trust in this understanding then becomes our rest.

But what of telling God what we need and want? Shouldn't we pray about projects such as our family needs or our stewardship campaign? Certainly this is an important part of prayer, but something more is needed. Jesus taught us that prayer is entering into a relationship with God. It's where we recognize the wonder of God and bow before the one who we choose to believe cares more for us than any human being ever could. "Our Father... **Thy** will be done." We must first be still and remember who is really in charge. So the first stage of true prayer, possibly the real work of prayer is the quieting of our own hearts and minds. It's putting our agenda aside for a moment to see if just maybe God too has more to say.

It's so easy to get caught up in the struggle to hold on to what we think we know and want. In some ways as long as we have human finite limitations we will always struggle. But whenever we can let go of what we "know" (or think we know) that is when we become teachable. It is then that the Spirit of God can move us into some amazing paths. The work of prayer, possibly more than anything else is to come to the point at which we can put distractions aside so that we can actually hear God speak.

Our prayer is not to inform God of anything. God already knows. Being in God's presence, listening to and articulating the yearnings of our spirits is our way of joining with God in God's work. In this way we claim our place within the Divine plan.

THE PRACTICE

With these things in mind I now turn to some suggestions that I hope will help us in this work of prayer. You'll notice that I start with relaxation. You might consider how relaxed you would feel as a trusting child coming into the presence of a loving and trustworthy parent or guardian. This is how Jesus told us to come.

1. Sit, kneel, stand or take whatever position you feel most comfortable taking.
2. Close your eyes or focus on one point to keep yourself from getting too distracted.
3. Take a deep breath and feel the life giving air go all the way down into your belly. (Remember that the word for "spirit" in both the Greek and Hebrew also mean breath or wind).
4. Hold your breath for five seconds or so and then let it all go and allow your whole body to relax from your head, down through your shoulders chest and arms. Let the relaxation move through your whole body, down through your midsection and finally down into your legs and feet. In short, just let both mind and body rest.
5. Now, briefly tell God what's on your mind. Then stop and listen to what the silence reveals. Are there places in your life that feel out of sync? Are there relationships that need work? Are you feeling happy? Sad? Troubled? Lift each of these concerns to God and remember that God does care about and love you.
6. As you consider the work of the church, ask yourself what aspect of the church's work you feel a special kinship with? Take another deep breath and let it out. What priorities or activities rise up within you as worthy of note? Are there specific people in the congregation that come to mind? In your mind, imagine holding these people or situations in your out-stretched arms and lifting them up to heaven, up to God. Offer them as well as yourself to the Lord.
7. Think of one need in the church that is important to you. Consider what resources this need requires. How would you like to help? Pray for wisdom for yourself and for others in meeting this need.
8. Finally, thank God for the privilege of sharing this time. Thank God for the people of our church and for anything else that comes to your mind.
9. Go in peace.

God, we pray for the moving of your Spirit within your church at Blair Road United Methodist Church. Open our hearts and fill us with Your vision for ministry here. Let us not be motivated by all of the "supposed tos," but only by your love as demonstrated by your Son. Amen.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1 Peter 5: 6-7

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Acts 4: 31-32

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

*Notice that what happens is that prayer rather than bringing "things" brought **God**. It was then that things happened. When the object of prayer is "God," the end result is the good of all.*

Luke 10: 38-42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

For those of you who tend to like to be busy, don't be discouraged. There are ways to listen to God and recognize God's presence even in the midst of activity. There are a number of books that emphasize this idea. For e.g. Kitchen Table Theology: Wisdom From The Heart And Hearth by Peg Stokman. Also Brother Lawrence (a 17th century monastery cook) in The Practice of the Presence of God talked of consciously "performing all [our] actions for the love of God."