

FOCUS TEXT: ROMANS 8:26-28

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

THEME VERSE

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

OPENING HYMN

“The Spirit Intercedes for Us”
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 180)

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, we come before you with aches and hopes, griefs and joys. We know that our days will see more experiences that give rise to these and many more emotions. Grant us your presence and remind us of it, too, so that in all experiences of life, we are restored to a peace that can only be found in you. Amen.

Let us pray

Session three: The expressions of prayer

BY ANNA MADSEN

INTRODUCTION

It is indeed true that many results of prayer are intangible, and even impossible to discern. But it is also true that prayer can demonstrably change the brain, reduce stress levels and, say some studies, correlate with otherwise inexplicable healing in those for whom people have prayed. In this last session, we investigate the effects of prayer: personally, communally and on the very mission of the Church.

While not listed as a “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5, some Christians seem to have a unique “knack” for prayer. For that matter, some Christian traditions seem to be not just more comfortable with, but more centered in prayer, ranging in ways from the quiet, monastic tradition to the more expressive Pentecostal one. Some Christians find prayer to be primarily about re-centering, while others find it to be about re-connecting.

The reasons for praying also vary. Some believe in the “power of prayer,” trusting that the more one prays, or the more people who pray, the better chance there is that God will “hear” and attend to prayers. Others believe that prayer is less about changing God and more about changing the one who prays. We’ll consider the reasons for and the results of prayer.

THE PENTECOSTAL TRADITION

📖 **Read aloud:** 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common

good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

The tradition of Pentecostalism started in Kansas. I don't know about you, but when I first heard this, it took me by surprise: Kansas? I had pictured Pentecostalism originating in a more southern location, but in fact, it began in Topeka, with a pastor named Charles Parham. People were feeling a little desperate in the heartland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and were yearning all the more for some divine intervention. Parham loved 1 Corinthians, chapters 12-14, in which he found tremendous power to provide hope for a better way and a better day. In this extended passage, believers are invited to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to turn around not just their social circumstances, but their very lives.

One of the people shaped by Parham's preaching was William Seymour, an African American man who was born the son of slaves. Seymour, perhaps the primary force behind modern-day Pentecostalism, was not even allowed to listen to Parham directly because Seymour was black. Moved by the echoing words he overheard anyway, he transported Parham's teachings to Los Angeles, in a particular section filled with people who were Mexican American, Asian American and African American: Those, in other words, also not welcome in mainstream white society or churches.

From Seymour's work there, Pentecostalism spread throughout the country. It expressed welcome not just to various cultures, but also to women as leaders in the church. In fact, some mark Agnes Ozman as the first Pentecostal preacher because on the first day of Parham's gathering in Topeka, she

spoke in tongues, a defining phenomenon for the Pentecostal tradition. From that moment women were welcomed as full-fledged preachers. It's worth noting that this was seven decades before women were ordained in the Lutheran traditions preceding the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Sociologist Margaret Poloma studies Pentecostalism—and practices it through the Vineyard movement. Paloma asserts that many mainline denominations (like Lutheran churches) tend to “intellectualize” faith and “make [faith] a matter of belief: Does it make sense? Is it rational?”

Instead, she says, Pentecostalism is more interested in the full integration of body, mind and spirit, even allowing for one to throw one's body (or have it be thrown by the power of God) on the floor (“being slain in the Spirit”) during prayer and communion with God. She suggests that the Pentecostal tradition allows for people to experience a cathartic, emotional and physical connection with God that might itself be a gift to offer other traditions that might be more staid or “in-the-pews.”

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Have you ever attended a Pentecostal worship service? If so, when and where?
2. Have you experienced an event such as speaking in tongues or being bodily affected by prayer—either personally or by observing these physical expressions of prayer?
3. Brain researchers have detected areas of the brain that either activate or become quieted depending upon the type of spiritual event. Although there is no disagreement about whether this occurs, there is disagreement about why. Do you notice a difference in yourself before, during and after prayer?

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

📖 Read aloud: Romans 8: 26-27

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

The word “contemplation” has an interesting word history. It begins with a prefix that means “with,” and then merges with the word “temple,” from the Latin *templum*, meaning the area where the eyes are; in other words, the act of gazing—or looking at—something with intention. There is some question about whether the word “temple,” namely the spot on your forehead, and “temple,” namely a place of worship, are related.

I like to think they are: The temple is the place you go to contemplate, to see God.

There are a variety of ways of praying contemplatively. Some repeat a word, for example. You may have heard of the “Jesus Prayer,” which is a variation of the tax collector’s prayer in Luke 18:13, “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Often it is simply shortened, so that the pray-er says the name of Jesus over and over in focused prayer.

Other times, an image is used to focus thought, perhaps by way of an icon or a personal object that is seen as particularly sacred to the one praying.

Some who engage in contemplative prayer simply attend to their breathing, concentrating on the rhythmic in-and-out of their diaphragm as they breathe, and thereby are alive, in God.

Contemplation is different than meditation, because it has a focus on communion with God. It’s also different from prayer that is prescribed in community. It is a highly personal encounter with God in sparse, quiet ways—ways that still the mind and the body and the spirit, and in so doing, yield stronger expressions of all three.

Our text from Romans 8 might well describe one way of experiencing contemplative prayer: In the stillness of the focus, the Holy Spirit enters into our deepest longings, our deepest joys and our deepest griefs. According to Terry York, an associate professor at Baylor University, “ironically, even shallow prayer can be a way of avoiding our deepest prayer.” Contemplative prayer invites us to leave the shallow end and enter the deep baptismal waters of grace.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Do you set aside time to pray in a particular way, or pray when you are able?
5. Have you ever experienced a profound connection with God in solitary prayer? What was unique about that moment?
6. Medieval women mystics were renowned for having visions of God, holy interactions that occurred during private prayer and deep yearning for communication with God. Hildegard of Bingen (Germany), Birgitta of Sweden and Julian of Norwich (England) encountered God in intensely personal and intimate ways. Often, God instructed them to write their visions down to share with others. Have you found that your moments of prayer communion with God are relatable and relevant to the lives of others in your midst? How so?

PROCESS THEOLOGY: THE INTERRELATIONSHIP OF ALL THINGS

📖 Read: Romans 8:28

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

This very moment that you are experiencing is dependent on countless moments before it.

For example, although I, the author, am not physically present with you, if I had not written this study and if I had opted, years ago, to become a librarian (as had been the plan!), you would be doing something entirely different right now—and depending on how you feel about this study, something better or worse!

You also wouldn't be reading these words at this moment if I had not been born, and if you had not been born. Your birth, and mine, were dependent on our parents meeting, and their parents meeting, and their parents' parents meeting, and catching that boat, or oversleeping on just that day, or crossing the street at just that moment, or taking just that job, or noticing that special glance from across the field.

These moments might have seemed inconsequential at the time, but in fact, they had incredible and unforeseen consequences, because they led to you reading these words at this very moment—which in turn may, for better or worse, influence the life of someone you will never, ever meet.

According to something called “process theology,” in every single moment—as in every nanosecond, the tiniest sliver of time imaginable—God is active.

God is active, and God is luring us into the next moment. That's the word process theologians use: lure.

God knows what God wants to happen in the next moment(s), but God can't orchestrate it. If God could, then we would be nothing more than chess players on a board or actors on a stage. We'd have no autonomy and only passive roles in life.

Instead, process theology says that God lures us into the next moment according to what God knows has happened and is happening in that moment.

Sometimes, like that big bass anglers hope to catch, we do actually catch the lure, and we are drawn into the next moment as God hopes we will be. And from that moment, in the same way, God lures us into the next intended moment according to God's will.

Other times, unfortunately, we do not catch God's lure. That also becomes a new moment; it's a moment not as God may have wished, but one that God now has.

Process theology says that although it is true grand differences will occur depending on whether we catch the lure or not, this much remains true in either case: Every moment is redeemable, and every moment is redeemed.

That is, every moment becomes a past moment of which God is aware and yields a new moment with new “stuff” with which God can work to bring out the closest approximation to God's agenda, given what God now has to work with.

This business about “catching a lure” is fascinating, for you can't catch a lure if you don't notice it. You also can't catch the lure if there are too many other competing options. (“Look! Shiny!”)

In process theology, prayer becomes a key element needing our time and attention so that we can, in fact, notice God's lure. Prayer centers one's attention on God, and on the moment, and on moments that came before, are present now, and could come in the future.

Buddhist tradition might call it “mindfulness,” and there is indeed something of that. But this is a mindfulness grounded in an understanding of God. We would look for a very different lure from, say, a tyrant than we would from a righteous savior.

Looking at the text from Romans from a process theology perspective, Paul is not suggesting that all things are as God wants them to be.

Rather, Paul's words can be read as an understanding that God is present and participating in every nanosecond moment, cherishing it, pulling it and redeeming it into the very next nanosecond moment, which God also cherishes, pulls and redeems.

Share aloud or reflect:

- 7 Does prayer shape the connections you feel with people whom you know, those

whom you once knew and even those whom you will never meet?

8. How does this connectivity shape your actions when you are not praying?
9. What do you feel is the benefit or result of praying for people whom we will possibly never, ever meet?

CONCLUSION

Prayer is an elemental part of faith life. It is strange that after millennia of people praying across religious traditions, it is still not entirely clear what it is or what it does! In different ways and for different reasons, those who practice prayer do so convinced that it enables

them to feel more connected with God, more connected with others, and more compelled to live out of and into a faith grounded in God's intentions for us as individuals and as a part of the communion of the saints.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, you have provided for us the opportunity for prayer and community. We give you thanks for the moments that have preceded this one, known and unknown, to bring us together here and now. We ask that you fill us with trust in you, awareness of one another, and a desire to know you and see you in the deepest of ways. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” (*ELW* 841) 🌿

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To explore forms of prayer and deepen other forms of prayer participants have already found to be particularly powerful in their own lives.
- To create different objects that may encourage prayer life in a variety of ways.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals
- Bibles for participants (NRSV preferred)
- Nice writing paper of different sizes, pens of various colors, tea boxes or bags, mugs to exchange, fabric squares (some colorful, some lighter solid colors and smaller), fabric markers, fabric glue, scissors, strong colorful rope or yarn.

Let us pray

Session three: The expressions of prayer
BY ANNA MADSEN

It is entirely possible that some, many or all the women in your study have never actively thought about prayer. Prayer is such a staple of faith life that, ironically, it might be therefore easy to accept without much thought!

I'm reminded of a story of a late family friend of ours, a professor of philosophy at an ELCA school, who, after the invocation at the beginning of a faculty meeting, raised his hand and asked, “Have you ever offered an invocation that didn't work?”

It's a great question! It's also a difficult question, and perhaps an uncomfortable one as well.

Why do we pray? Is it to change God's mind, or ours, or both? What does it take to change God's mind: Is it the mass, volume and sincerity of prayers? Or is it more of a dynamic relationship, one born of mutual attentiveness and bounded only by the constraints of realistic possibility?

This study will invite you to consider what prayer is and does. It could be threatening, perhaps, or it could be an avenue for asking questions, offering experiences and settling into the mystery that is prayer. Be attentive and welcoming to those for whom prayer is key, those for whom prayer is tangential, and those for whom it is mysterious, perhaps even suspect.

TOPIC ONE: SUBMISSION

The beloved NPR reporter, Cokie Roberts, is rumored to have once said, "As long as algebra is taught in school, there will be prayer in school!" Along those same lines, we've all heard the saying that there's no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole.

At its root, prayer might be best described as an act of submission.

In prayer, you see, we submit ourselves to the past and also to the present: Nothing can be changed about the matter (whether it is joyful or grief-inducing) which brings us before God, nor can we absolutely control what is coming down the pike.

Often, however, we may want to believe that although we can't control anything, God can. Who hasn't heard it said that "God is in control"?

However, the phrase is problematic in this way: If God is in control, then—everything is as God wants it to be. We need only take a glance at our personal lives and at the news to see that this is simply not the case.

I can identify with praying in algebra class. I prayed before math tests until my knees were bruised and my mouth parched! But my failing grades in math were not God's fault: They were in part mine, in part my teacher's, and in part a manifestation that I was not called to be a mathematician in any way!

And although both people of faith and atheists

prayed in foxholes, wars still raged, soldiers still were wounded, and they died, along with dreams of those who loved them back home. Of course, war is not the intention of God.

However, in both cases, as with any occasion for prayer, we pray because we ultimately do depend on God for all things: not to orchestrate every moment and every matter, but to redeem them.

This study might bring up occasions when people prayed and felt as if they heard nothing in return. Compassion and open hearts are then necessary.

This study might be an opportunity to reframe whether God was indeed absent, as might have been powerfully experienced (a feeling which must indeed be deeply honored), or instead suffering beside them, gathering them and related people and events into more hopeful possibilities.

It might also be an opportunity to invite participants to consider ways that they can more avail themselves to hear God, notice God and respond to God's lures.

TOPIC TWO: TRUST

📖 **Read:** A prayer of Julian of Norwich

In you, Father all-mighty, we have our preservation and our bliss. In you, Christ, we have our restoring and our saving. You are our mother, brother, and savior. In you, our Lord the Holy Spirit, is marvelous and plenteous grace. You are our clothing; for love you wrap us and embrace us. You are our maker, our lover, our keeper. Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen. (A prayer of Julian of Norwich, *ELW* p. 87)

Julian of Norwich was a mystic who lived from about 1342 to 1423: She died exactly 60 years before Luther was born, for a frame of reference.

She was a recluse who was cloistered in a small room attached to the Church of St. Julian in Norwich. It's not clear whether she belonged to a religious order, but it is clear that she was greatly revered by the surrounding community, not to mention by history.

Julian experienced a series of visions, recorded first soon after her experience, and then twenty years later. They are known as her "Showings," or her "Revelations."

In contrast to many male monastics who gave up power, privilege and wealth to join an abbey, women had little they could give up except their bodies. Often, that manifested itself by a rejection of food.

Julian, however, believed that God is good, and that God created humanity as good, and so she was quite adamant that the body should be loved and tended rather than harmed and despised.

Interestingly, she breaks with Christian tradition before (and after!) her by referring to God as mother, as you read in her prayer above. She writes, "This fair lovely word 'mother' is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things. To the property of motherhood belong nature, love, wisdom and knowledge, and this is God." (Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, trans. Edmund College, O.S.A. and James Walsh, S.J., Paulist Press, 1978, 299).

In the very beginning of this prayer, she acknowledges that not in immediate surroundings do we have our security. She, completely dependent upon charity from others, living alone in an age where disease and want regularly ravaged large swathes of people, understood that in a powerful way. Instead, we find our true happiness and comfort in God.

By no means did Julian spiritualize her faith: She was particularly aware that the benevolence of others sustained her. She herself had a reputation of offering simple but sincere hospitality to all who came to sit at her feet.

She did, however, acknowledge in the famous

last line of this prayer that not that all is well, but that all will be well.

This session could provide an opportunity for people to discuss areas in their lives where they feel powerless, even despairing; and in fact, they might indeed have every reason to be. Because Julian's prayer unites acknowledgement of what should be with what actually is, this prayer might be a tremendous resource for those who need both immediate comfort and future hope.

CLOSING ACTIVITIES (OPTIONAL)

Portable prayer objects

Find and arrange an array of simple votive candles and teas. Invite people to bring and share a mug with other participants, and use a permanent marker to write a prayer or prayerful words on the mug. Find nice (new or recycled) paper and cut or tear it into various shapes on which women may write a word or words of meaning and focus to use in their daily prayer life.

Prayer flags

In Tibet, there is a Buddhist tradition of hanging prayer flags in the wind, carrying not only the prayers through the wind but the concern and well-wishes too.

In this activity, participants can mix and match colorful background swatches with solid fabric pieces on which they write petitions or draw pictures expressing their thoughts.

Depending on the community, the flags can be hung in the narthex, in the sanctuary or even outside the church. These small pieces of fabric, strung together, can be a continual process and reminder that the prayers of the people arise through the church and local community.

Particularly for women who are all too often alone, this activity might be a way for them to participate, be recognized, and recall that they are part of a larger community and they are colorfully remembered and valued. 🌸