

Moses did it. So did Ruth. Even Isaiah and Jeremiah. Jesus and Paul did, as well as Mary, and so do you. We have this spiritual practice in common with Jews and Muslims, Baha'i's and Hindus, and many others. What am I talking about? Prayer—a conversation with God. Some may pray regularly at certain times of the day, while others may pray only when getting into trouble or when worried. We offer our complaints, concerns, hopes, fears, desires, and joys.

Whether through silent meditation, spoken words, or our heads bowed to the floor, God mysteriously enters into this time of conversation, no thought too silent, no words too mumbled, to go unnoticed by God. An infinite number of words and thoughts float through time and space, echoing in the Being of God? Isn't that amazing?!

Sometimes when gathered with a group of people and someone asks, "Who would like to pray?" I see blank stares from worried faces. I've heard folks say, "Oh, I don't know how to pray; I'm not quite sure what to say." That seems to be the

response Jesus received as he gathered with his disciples and warned them to not to be showoffs when they pray. Jesus explained to his followers: Don't stand in the sanctuary and offer fancy prayers just to impress everyone; instead, go into your room, close the door, and pray to God who is already there with you. Have a conversation.

I can almost hear the disciples wondering, "Well, what do we say to God? How are we supposed to pray?" That's a question I imagine we've all asked from time to time, and so Jesus offered them and us an example.

- Begin by showing respect to God: "Our Father in Heaven, your name is sacred and holy."
- Before you get into your list of wants, think of the bigger picture and ask God to set the world right: "Bring in your kingdom so that earth becomes like heaven."
- Ask only for what you need, not for your list of wants that clutter your life: "Give us today the food we need to survive."

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- When you make a mess of your life and need grace, trust in God's forgiveness, and then when others hurt you, offer them the same: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who hurt us."
- Ask God to continue to guide you, for God never gives up on you: "Keep us safe from harm and those situations that tempt us."

Although these words serve as a very helpful form of prayer, have you ever had a time when you just can't figure out what to say? I've discovered that sometimes silence is the best form of prayer, a quiet space to sort through the complicated emotions swirling within me.

I sometimes think we've restricted ourselves from the broadness of what prayer can be, believing that prayer only involves sitting still, with our eyes closed, our heads bowed, hands folded, and a certain set of words. But I think merging our lives into the center of God can evoke so much more!

Years ago, while working on my dissertation on interfaith spirituality, I came across the book *Prayer*

*for People Who Can't Sit Still*. Disciples pastor Bill Tenny-Brittian invites us to imagine all sorts of prayer styles:

- He suggests that writing our thoughts in a journal is a form of prayer.
- Using prayer beads can keep our hands busy while offering prayers to God.
- The artistic expression of painting, drawing, or music can serve as a form of prayer.
- One can offer prayer while walking through a labyrinth or through one's neighborhood, engaging the whole body in an expression of prayer.
- Movement prayer can include using our bodies through dancing, kneeling, bowing, or yoga.

Let's try a movement prayer on a variation of the prayer Jesus taught his followers:

- **“Our Loving Parent,”**—hug the body.
- **“Creator of the Cosmos,”**—broaden hands skyward.
- **“Your name is holy.”**—place fingertips over lips.
- **“Your kingdom come.”**—cross hands and place on shoulders.
- **“Your will be done,”**—cross both hands over breastbone.
- **“Through me as it is throughout the universe.”**—open hands before you (giving gesture).
- **“Teach us to trust,”**—form hands into bowl.
- **“That you give all that we need.”**—cross hands over belly.
- **“Forgive our sins,”**—cross fists at wrists.
- **“As we forgive those who sin against us.”**—break wrists apart, hands open out.
- **“Lead us away from danger,”**—place a hand on each thigh.
- **“And turn our feet from evil-doing.”**—place a hand on each foot.<sup>1</sup>

I especially enjoy what I call star-gazing prayer as I look through my telescope at the heavens and marvel at the vastness of the universe. When I look at our nearest neighborhood galaxy, the Andromeda Galaxy, I gaze in wonderment. It contains some 300 billion suns, some with planets of their own. As I ponder the possibility of life in

that distant place, I become awestruck with the magnitude of the universe, for the light from that galaxy, traveling at 186,000 miles per second, took 2.3 million years to reach my eyes—long before we humans documented any history!

As comet discoverer David Levy once said, “But aren’t silent worship and contemplation the very essence of stargazing?”<sup>2</sup> I think that sounds like prayer to me.

French playwright Jean Giraudoux (zho ZHEE-roh-doo) exclaimed, “I know perfectly well that at this very moment the whole universe is listening to us—and that every word we say echoes to the remotest star.”<sup>3</sup> His words remind me that looking at the wonder of the night sky serves a form of prayer, for the vastness of the universe listens.

I’ve also learned that gazing at the universe helps me worry a bit less about whatever things I’m facing, for the vastness of the sky makes my problems seem much smaller.

Jesus also looked around at the world to remind us to not worry, for even after offering the disciples

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an example of prayer, one of them must have confessed, “But I’m still worried.” Jesus pointed to some birds and said, “Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?” (Mt. 6:26-27, CEB).

Looking at some flowers growing nearby, Jesus asked, “And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don’t wear themselves out with work, and they don’t spin cloth... If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully...won’t God do much more for you?” (Mt. 6:28-38 CEB).

Jesus suggested that taking time to look at God’s creation can reduce our worries, what we often call stress. Whether it’s star gazing or bird

watching, what I call Nature Prayer can center our lives in wonderment of God. Psychologist Dr. Edward Hallowell suggested in an interview with *Psychology Today* that

Prayer or meditation can change the state of your brain as well. Talk to God when you feel worried. If you are not religious, learn how to meditate. Brain scans and EEG monitors show beneficial changes in the brain during meditation and prayer. These changes correlate with most of our measures of improved health, including longevity and reduced incidence of illness. And extended worry subsides with regular prayer or meditation.<sup>4</sup>

When you find yourself worried, be a prayer worrier—relax, meditate—for by pausing to see the stars, flowers, or birds, you can discover again God’s presence with you in the midst of your prayer worries.

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<sup>4</sup> Edward H. Hallowell, “Fighting Life’s “What Ifs,” November 1, 1997, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/199711/fighting-lifes-what-ifs](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/199711/fighting-lifes-what-ifs)

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative Lectionary *Program 2 2018-19* Worship Resources Copyright © 2018 Clergy Stuff, p. 45 (adapted).

<sup>2</sup> James Mullaney, *Celebrating the Universe: The Spirituality & Science of Stargazing*, 2013, p.34.

<sup>3</sup> Mullaney, p. 11.