

Concrete Spirituality

By Megan Collins

Beads Aren't Just for Hippies

“Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” (Psalm 46:10-11)

Reflection

When I was 8, I begged my parents to let me have a sleepover. They agreed, and a few hours later, my room was filled with giggling, wiggling little girls. As it got later, my parents in their wisdom told us it was time for bed. We protested, saying that we could not possibly be tired. My mother decided that she would sit in the room with us until we fell asleep. But what she didn't know was that we had a secret plan. We conspired to lay completely still and silent with our eyes shut until my mom thought we were asleep and left so that we could then continue playing. The plan never worked. Not once. We would lay there quietly for a few minutes and inevitably fall asleep, only to wake the next morning vowing that next time we would trick her.

Children seem to possess that constant energy, so that even if they appear to be sitting still, a foot is tapping or a hand having a thumb war under the table. As we get older, we develop the ability to sit still through long meetings or car trips. But even as we are physically inactive, our minds often race, worrying about work or family, making lists for the grocery store or home improvement, thinking through the week's activities or a problem yet unsolved. And then we come to pray. As our thoughts race ahead and our mind seems to spin, being mentally still with God becomes a difficult proposition. Our passage from the Psalms calls us to be still with God. This stillness before God is not just stillness in body, but a stillness of spirit. It is a willingness to clear aside the clutter in our minds and focus on God's presence with us. Notice that the verse calls us to be still so that we can “know that I am God.” As we submit ourselves to the discipline of “stillness” we are more fully able to know God and God's truth.

Activity

One way to help your mind learn to “be still” is to try prayer beads. Beads really are not just for hippies, and prayer beads are not just for Catholics. This week, find some time to stop by the store and pick up some beads that appeal to you. String them into a circle or a line. Then assign each bead what it will represent for prayer. The beads could be Scriptures for peace or discernment, each bead could be a beatitude or a fruit of the spirit. Each bead could be a person you are praying for, or the first bead could be the world, the next our country, the next our community, and so on from larger to smaller scale. You could follow the PRAY acronym, with the first bead focusing on Praise, the next Repentance, the third Asking and the fourth Yielding in silence before God. After you determine what each bead will stand for (and this can change), begin to carry the beads with you, or keep them in a spot for daily prayer. As you hold each bead, remember the person or idea it represents, and focus on

that in prayer. Then move through the beads until you have finished them. If you carry the beads with you, their presence can also be a reminder to pray.

The Psalm calls us to “Be still and know that I am God.” Try this week to find time to be still in body, in mind and in spirit before God.

Prayer

Holy God, I know you are with me when things are busy and my mind is racing. Help me to respond to the call to be still before you. Quiet my body and my mind as I pray that I might hear your voice, that I might feel your presence. Amen.

Key Thought

While keeping our bodies still during prayer gets easier, quieting our minds is often difficult. Prayer beads can help us focus our thoughts so that we can “be still, and know that I am God.”

Better than a Corn Maze

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105)

Reflection

I have spent most of my adult life lost. Not philosophically lost, but literally lost in trying to get from Point A to Point B in my car. It doesn't matter how many times I drive somewhere, or how familiar the town, somehow I still manage to get turned around. Just ask my husband, who has been on the end of many “I don't know how to get home from here” panicked phone calls. Last Christmas he was able to decrease the frequency of these phone calls with a pretty package containing a GPS.

For the most part, we don't like to be lost. Our Psalm today assures us that God's word will help us light the path of our lives that can often seem dark and disorienting. It is God who will show us the way to navigate through the darkness of our lives, even when we can't see what lies ahead. One way we can physically experience this trust in God's guidance is walking a labyrinth. If you have ever looked at a labyrinth, you may find yourself wondering how something that resembles a maze could feel spiritual. In reality, a labyrinth is not at all a maze. It has one way in, and one way out, with no wrong turns or dead ends. You simply follow the path toward the center of the circle, then follow the path back out again. As you walk you learn to trust the path before you, even when the turns feel unexpected. While our feet fall into a rhythm for walking, we are able to fall into rhythm with God as well. With each turn of the path we can listen for God, following the path God lays before us.

Activity

You can find a labyrinth here in Dayton at Westminster Presbyterian Church certain days during the month, and outside at Immanuel Korean Presbyterian. As you journey toward the center of the labyrinth, try to focus on letting go of the burdens you carry with you. Let go of the worries, the regret, the guilt, the insecurity. Or try to hold on for a moment to each of these, then let them go, trusting in God to care for you and forgive you. As you reach the center, take some time to pause and to be with God. Enjoy the feeling of relief and freedom at letting go of the burdens you carry. Then as your journey outward from the center, pray and experience God's strength and courage. Pray that God will equip you for the week ahead, to care for those in your life and to do the work God has put in front of you.

If you cannot go to an actual labyrinth, try prayer walking in a similar fashion in your neighborhood or at a park. You can follow the same pattern, releasing burden as you walk toward the half way point of your path, then praying for nourishment from God as you journey back home.

Prayer

God, your word is the light for my path. Guide me as I make decisions and as I discern who you are calling me to be. Help me to let go of the burdens I carry and nourish me to do the work you call us to do as disciples of Christ. Amen.

Key Thought

God's word guides us through the twists and turns of life. Walking the labyrinth helps us to fall into rhythm with God, let go of our burdens, and feel nourished by God's strength.

Falling on your Face

“At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the Lord my God and said “O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.” (Ezra 9:5-6)

Reflection

Every evening at dinner, our family prays together, usually using a prayer that the boys learned at preschool. One evening, our oldest son decided he didn't want to hold hands, and he didn't say the prayer with us. As I looked up at him disapprovingly, he looked back with wide eyes and said “Mommy. I was praying in my heart.” Touché.

Prayer doesn't always look the same way. We grow up learning not only certain words for prayers, but certain postures for prayer. We might learn that good Presbyterians pray with their hands folded, their heads lowered, and eyes closed. There are definitely good reasons for this posture of prayer. Having our heads lowered shows our reverence before God. Having our hands folded and eyes closed, well, practically, it keeps us from distracting ourselves.

But there really is no one posture for prayer. In fact, our bodies can be used as a part of the prayer. In our passage from Ezra, he tears his clothes, falls to his knees, bows his head and spreads out his hands, all as an act of confession. What if when we were praising God, we were standing with our arms in the air, hands opened up? What if during a prayer of confession we were on our knees with our heads bowed low? What if in a prayer for help, we were lying down on the floor?

Activity

Perhaps we won't try tear our clothes during the prayer of confession at worship, but this week try something new in prayer, and see if it changes how you feel. It doesn't have to be your whole body. When trying to let go of something in prayer, clench your fists and picture the items being held in your closed hands. Then pray to give them over to God, and open your hands with your palms upward.

If positional prayer helps you focus or connect with God, you might develop a routine of postures in prayer. Following the ACTS model of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication, you might develop four postures that feel natural for prayers in each of these areas.

Prayer

God, you have given us our whole selves to be used in worship. Help me to praise you with my whole being in prayer, in worship, and in service. Amen.

Key Thought

Our bodies can be used as instruments of prayer.

A Low Calorie Lunch?

'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:16-19)

Reflection

I like food. A lot. I like breakfast, lunch and dinner. I am especially fond of snacks and, my most favorite, dessert. If you appreciate food as I do, fasting poses a bit of a challenge. But it also creates an interesting opportunity. What would happen if I decided to miss a meal or two, and instead of using that time to eat, used that time to focus on God? What might come from my prayer time if instead of waiting in the drive-through line for a snack wrap at McDonalds, I sat quietly and listened for the voice of God?

For some, fasting from food is difficult, or medically prohibited. Although fasting traditionally involved refraining from food, fasting from other things too can provide an opportunity for us to draw near to God. You can fast from the computer, fast from television, or fast from any activity that distracts you and would provide time to spend in prayer and reflection.

The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that our motive is key in participating in spiritual disciplines. We would of course not want to hang a sign on the office door that declares we are fasting, or make that our Facebook status update. We fast not to draw attention to ourselves, or to make ourselves seem more holy, but in order to more clearly hear the voice of God when we set aside distractions and devote ourselves to prayer.

Activity

Pick one thing to try fasting from this week, whether it is a meal, or another distraction in your day. During the time of the activity you are setting aside, find a quiet space to spend time in prayer. Take a few deep breaths, letting go of the things you bring with you to this moment. Spend some time talking to God, then try to sit quietly in God's presence. If you can't find a quiet space in your day, put something in your pocket that reminds you of your fast, and each time you feel it, take a moment to pause and lift a prayer to God.

Prayer

God, our lives get so cluttered. Help us to clean out a space in our week so that we can more clearly hear your voice. Amen.

Key Thought

Periodically fasting from food or other distractions such as television or the internet can create quiet moments in our lives to pray and listen for God's voice.

You Can't Get this Jar at Pottery Barn

“And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment . . . And [Jesus] said to the woman ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’” (Luke 7:37-50)

Reflection

When I lived in New Jersey, we spent many rainy afternoons walking around the mall near our apartment. On the cold, gray days of fall, the Pottery Barn with its warm lighting, soft fabrics and shiny decorations was especially enticing. There were rows and rows of beautiful decorative jars and containers, all well outside of my budget, but pretty to admire. Now, on my bookshelf at home I have a gorgeous jar displayed. It sits by itself, in a place of prominence where the light hits it just right. But this beloved decoration was not purchased from a home store. This is the jar my five year old made out of clay for me.

The woman in our story is not polished. She is rough around the edges, shocking onlookers with her actions with Jesus. The ointment in her jar was worth a year’s wages, most likely her greatest possession, and in one moment she has lost it all, pouring it on Jesus’ feet. But Jesus does not condemn her. Instead he praises her for her faith. The jar she has broken has great worth not only in its contents, but in its intention. She has offered all that she has before her Lord.

Activity

What is something we can put in an alabaster jar to offer to God? What are the things we can come before Christ with and lay at his feet? This week, take some time to create your own alabaster jar. You might purchase clay to make one, or use a jar you have in your home. Then take a piece of paper and pray about what you would like to offer to God. You might offer your time, committing to spend time in prayer or service, you might offer a talent you have to God’s work. Or maybe you don’t know what you can offer, and you write a prayer asking God to show you. Put your paper inside the alabaster jar and place it in a space to remind you that you have much to offer to God’s work.

Prayer

God, the woman in this passage was praised for her faith in offering what she could to Jesus. Help me to know what I can offer in faith to you and to your work in this world. Amen.

Key Thought

We all have something to offer to God. Creating an alabaster jar helps us to take time to reflect on what we can offer, and serves as a reminder to us to continue coming to the feet of Christ.

Location, Location, Location

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.’ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, ‘Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.’ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.”

(Exodus 24:12-20)

Reflection

Do you have special locations from your life? The park where you met your spouse? The rocking chair you used with your newborn? The town where you grew up? There is something about being in these places that brings back a rush of memories, of emotion, of meaning. For someone else, it is just a rocking chair. But for you, you can still remember the blanket your daughter was wrapped in, the smell of baby soap on her hair, the feeling of her breath against your arm. You find yourself humming that song you sang each night as you rock in the chair. There is nothing extraordinary about those spaces to anyone else. But they connect you with an important time in your life in a powerful way.

We have those spaces with God too. For Moses, there was the mountain. God met Moses on the mountain, and it became a “thin space,” a space where the boundary between humanity and God seemed to shrink. On the mountain Moses heard God’s voice, grew in understanding of God’s purposes, and came away challenged in faith. We too can have places where we feel closer to God. For some, it will be a physical mountain at a camp like Montreat, where they feel closer and connected to God. For others, it might be another spot out in nature, or a chapel, or a prayer spot at home.

Activity

Wherever you find a “thin space” try to find time to be there. If it is far away, you may not travel there often, but you could look at pictures of the spot when you are away. If you don’t have a spot where you have felt closer to God, try experimenting to see what works for you. If you like nature, spending time at a park, in the woods, or by the water might help you feel more connected to God. You could also try coming to sit in the sanctuary or chapel during the week when it is quiet. Even in your own home, there might be a certain chair that you set aside for use during quiet times and prayer. We may not be able to spend forty days and nights on the mountain like Moses, but even brief moments in our “thin spaces” can help us experience God’s presence.

Prayer

God, I know you are always with us, no matter where we are. Help me to recognize places where I feel especially close to you, and to find times to set aside to spend there in prayer. Amen.

Key Thought

We may find that certain locations help us to feel closer to God. Spending time in these spots, or remembering them in photographs, can help us feel God's presence.

Small Group Meeting: Concrete Spirituality

1. Path of Community

Go around your group and let everyone share their answers to this question: Do you have any object that is of special meaning or significance to you? What is it? Why is it important to you?

2. Path of Learning

Today we will review. Discuss these questions in your group.

- Which of this week's readings/scriptures meant the most to you?
- This week we talked about "thin spaces," or places where we feel especially close to God. Is there a place in your life where you felt especially close to God? Where was it?
- Of the concrete spirituality disciplines you explored this week, was there one that you were interested in trying? What about that discipline was intriguing to you?
- If you are going to try the prayer beads, what meaning might you assign to each bead?

3. Path of Service

Plan for your group to take part in a form of service to others – whether separately or as individuals – by the end of the fifth week of our study. Take time each week to work on your plans. During the final week, evaluate your project, celebrate what went well, and learn from those things that could have been better.

4. Path of Invitation

Brainstorm some people you can invite to be part of your group. Commit to inviting them the next time you get together. When it comes to the latter part of your study, you might want to plan a social event to which you could invite newcomers. This would be especially helpful if you elect to continue meeting as a small group after Lent.

5. Path of Worship

Share any highs or lows from the week. After each person shares, the group may say together, "We share your prayer." Other options include participants taking turns in leading prayer, or having a time for silent prayer after all have shared.

Close by saying the Lord's Prayer together. (You may wish to join hands for this!)

6. Path of Stewardship

Help your host clean up. If appropriate, turn out the lights as you leave.