

Do you ever feel like prayer should come more easily than it does? I mean, it seems like it should be easy... but when you get right down to it, it doesn't always *feel* easy. It often feels like something is getting in the way, getting in the way of your ability to pray.

What's that "something"? Maybe... maybe you don't know what to say. Maybe pre-written prayers feel a little stiff, or inauthentic, like you're praying someone else's prayer (because you kinda are). You don't feel like your heart is in it. But still, you don't know what words to say on your own, either. I mean... are there things you're supposed to say? Are you supposed to use all those "thee"s and "thou"s? Does God like that? Does God secretly think that's a little much? And are there things you're just *not* supposed to say to God? Like... how detailed should these confessions be? How real is this "prayer" thing supposed to get? What are you supposed to say when you pray? You don't know.

Maybe you don't know what to say. But then, maybe your problem is that you just can't keep focused on what you want to say. Maybe this sounds familiar. I might be praying:

God, bless my family and keep them healthy and safe. Bless Keith and Ellie and Noah... does Noah need his violin at school today? I wish the school sent text reminders on violin day, right to my cell phone. Did I pay the cell bill? Or is that one of the ones on auto-pay? Oh wait... I'm supposed to be praying here. But I have the theme song from Golden Girls stuck in my head, and honestly, how is anyone supposed to pray with the theme from Golden Girls in your head? I wonder if that show is on Hulu... I should go back and watch it. Oh my God, I'm supposed to be praying. Oh, God, sorry for saying 'Oh my God,' that's one's a commandment, the whole Lord's name in vain thing, and... you know what? I'm clearly not in the right head space. Let's just try this prayer thing tomorrow. Amen.

Sound familiar? No? Just me? If you're anything like me, the distractions of daily life or the rabbit holes of your own brain make you anything but focused when you pray.

Maybe you don't know what words to say, and maybe you just can't focus on the words you want to say. But maybe that's not it at all. Maybe it's the whole timing of this prayer thing. For some reason, Christians talk a lot about praying in the morning, starting your day with prayer, praying with the rising sun, and... seriously, who thought that up? See, I've seen some of you in the wee hours of the morning. I know that some of you are not morning people. I know that if you're praying with the rising sun, the most you're offering God is a series of grumpy and incoherent grunts, like a devout zombie. Isn't there a way for night owls to pray? Even for me... see, I'm even a morning person... but still, the morning often feels like the *worst* time of day for me to pause and pray. In the morning, I'm running around the house like a headless chicken. Seriously, if I'm able to get a shower, get dressed, brush my teeth, pack lunches, and get both of my children to look like reasonably civilized humans before we have to head out the door, that's a win. Eating breakfast is a bonus. (But while we're on the subject of prayer – thank you, Lord, for Dunkin'.)

If any of that sounded at all familiar – one, you're in good company... and two, you probably want more. You want more from your prayer life. You want to pray, and you maybe need a little help figuring out how. You want more.

This is a good season for wanting more. This season of the church year, the season after Advent and Christmas, is called the season of Epiphany. It's intended, in the church, to be a season of growth. That's how the church year works. We start with a season of preparation (like Advent), the move to a season of celebration (like Christmas), and then to a season of growth (Epiphany). (We'll repeat the whole process again in a few more months with Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.) The season that we're in

right now, the season of Epiphany, is a season of growth. And for us as Christians, I can think of no better way for us to grow than to grow in prayer.

Plus, in the regular calendar, it's also a season of resolutions. Sort of. We're two Sundays in, so statistically speaking, a lot of those New Year's resolutions have been broken by now. Most of the rest will fall by the wayside by mid-February. That doesn't mean we can't start fresh right now. Maybe it's just the right time for us to make a resolution to focus more on prayer.

That's what this sermon series is all about. Yet we're not going to focus on any prayers that you probably already know, like the Lord's Prayer. This sermon series will focus on the most amazing prayer you've probably never heard of, a prayer five hundred years in the making.<sup>1</sup>

Actually, it's not so much a "prayer" as it is a prayer practice. It's a practice developed by a man named Íñigo, a man who came to be known by the world as St. Ignatius of Loyola. He was born in Spain around the same time Columbus was sailing the ocean blue, and he had big, grand dreams. He wanted to be... well... a knight in shining armor, really, who would be victorious in battle, serving a noble and beautiful lady, gaining for himself riches and renown. Ignatius was a man more likely to be found dueling than praying, more likely to be found on the battlefield than in a church, more likely to be found in the company of a wealthy woman than a humble priest.

That is, until a cannonball on the battlefield shattered his leg, leaving him bedridden for months. In his day, hospitals were run primarily by religious orders... and Ignatius was stuck in a hospital, stuck with nothing to do but sit and think and read the Bibles and devotional books the hospital provided. His life was transformed in that time, transformed by the things he read in that time. In those months, Ignatius came to faith

---

<sup>1</sup> The title for this sermon series is not a result of my own creative thinking. The title is borrowed from the preface of *Rexamining the Ignatian Examen: Fresh Ways to Pray from your Day* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2015).

in Christ. He turned from his former life and devoted himself completely to God. Eventually, after years of study, ascetic living, and prayer, he founded an order called the Society of Jesus – the Jesuits. Even today, nearly five hundred years later, it's an order committed to education, publishing, social justice, economic development. The Jesuits have changed the world... all because Ignatius broke his leg. Funny how God works, isn't it?

As Ignatius deepened his faith and reflected upon his faith, he began to compose the writings that would become the founding and guiding documents of his Jesuit order. In one of these writings he developed a method of prayer called the "Examen," a method of prayer that continues to be practiced by Jesuits – and many, many others – even today. Throughout these five weeks, I hope to lead you in developing your own practice of prayer, inspired by the Examen. Disclaimer: it's inspired by what Ignatius wrote, not identical to it. I've taken some liberties with the original form (and for all I know, old Ignatius is rolling over in his grave for the liberties I've taken). But those liberties have been helpful for me, and I hope they can be helpful for you.

I hope this is the prayer for you. If you're a person who struggles with what to say when you pray, this might be your prayer. The words come right out of your life, out of your day. No need to think anything up. If you're a person who struggles to stay focused while praying, this might be your prayer. It has a series of simple steps to help keep you on track. If you're a person who can't for the life of you understand why Christians always seem to like praying in the morning, this might be your prayer. It's meant to be prayed at the end of the day. It's practically designed for night owls.

In its basic form, this "Examen" prayer leads you to reflect on your day, to give thanks for the blessings of your day, to confess and repent and seek forgiveness for the ways you've fallen short during your day, and to look ahead to tomorrow. But all of that

starts with step one: connecting with God, opening yourself to God's presence in your midst.

Now, you may already be rolling your eyes. *Pastor Candy, that already sounds vague and confusing and weird and awfully "churchy."* Just go with me, okay? Think about it: how often do you make a real attempt to connect with God, to open yourself up to God, to make yourself available to God? How often do you hang out with God? God's making the effort, already and always... how often are you?

This first part of the prayer, as you take some time to actually connect with God, is a time to pause. It's a time to get your brain out of the work day or the school day or the day-to-day; out of the sink full of dishes, or the merger at work, or the pile of emails you have yet to return, or the crack you just found in the foundation, or the childcare schedule you haven't quite yet worked out, or the COVID test results you're awaiting, or the credit card statement that just arrived, or the pills you need to pick up, or the homework you still have to do, or the weird noise your car engine is making. It's a time to get your brain out of all of that and into a holy space. It's that simple, that huge, that important. It's a time when you invite God – *God!* – to reveal God's own Self, to inspire you, to guide the rest of your prayer. And... not just God, in some vague way. God the Holy Spirit.

Our scripture for today, though brief, abounds with wisdom about the Spirit's presence in our lives, the Spirit's role in our prayer lives. We read it earlier in worship... but it's short enough and powerful enough that I think it's worth reading again.

[Romans 8:26-27, NRSV]

<sup>26</sup>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. <sup>27</sup>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 apostle Paul is writing this letter called “Romans” to followers of Christ who are struggling with life and with the life of faith. And he just says it. Paul is good with words, but he doesn’t mince words. He says what’s what. He says, “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Romans 8:26, NRSV). We don’t know how to pray. He acknowledges that prayer is hard, especially when life is particularly rough. Yet he also reassures: the “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” (Romans 8:26-27, NRSV). He reassures us: we’re not alone in this prayer thing. When we just don’t have words, when prayer is too hard because life is too hard, we have the Spirit. The Spirit has our backs, and our hearts. The Spirit prays with us, if we’re open to that.

So... try being open to that. This week, give yourself – give *God* – two minutes, every day, near the end of the day. (Set yourself a timer if that helps. Or ask Alexa to do it.) Then... just pause. Pause for two minutes. You have two minutes in your day. If you don’t... Lord have mercy, you need to drop something. You’re going to implode. Take two minutes. Two minutes to pray.

Here’s what I don’t want you to do with those two minutes. Don’t fill those two minutes with a lot of requests to God, focusing on everything you need. Don’t fill those two minutes with a lot of confessions, dwelling on everything that’s wrong about you. Don’t even fill those two minutes with a lot of words of thanks, musing on everything you’re grateful for. Calm down, we’ll get to all of that. For now, for those two minutes, just pause. Pause and give yourself the space and time you need to connect with God.

You can use words as you pause, if that’s helpful. Maybe your own words... something like: *Holy Spirit, show yourself in a way I can really know and feel and understand. When I struggle to pray, help me know I’m not alone. When I don’t have any*

*words, give me words or help me be content with silence. Mostly, just be with me.* Want to say something, but don't have your own words? Use some ancient ones, if you like. Say "Come, Holy Spirit," ancient words spoken by ancient Christians. Say it over and over, like a mantra, if that helps, as you breathe in and out. *Come, Holy Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit.* Don't want words at all? Just breathe and wait. Wait to connect with God.

Now, will you feel utterly connected to God, in some undeniable and life-changing way, every single time, for that full two minutes? Of course not. There's no guarantee, no two-minutes-or-less. You're not ordering a pizza. You're waiting on the Spirit. There's mystery in all of this. You want a guarantee? I can guarantee you this: If you don't make the time and space to try to connect with God, you'll almost never feel that connection. So make the time and space. Try. Pause. Connect.

In this first step, it may seem like you're not doing much of anything. Just waiting around. But in taking this time, this time to pause, this time to connect with the Spirit, you are doing so much. Taking this time to pause and connect will help you transition from your daily life to your prayer life. You've got a lot going on, and a lot of it is not particularly prayerful. You need time to transition.

Taking this time to pause and connect will help make the rest of the prayer more meaningful. The next steps of the prayer will require you to take a reflective, profound, and sometimes hard look at the events of your day, and you can do that with more honesty and purpose and integrity if the Spirit is guiding and inspiring you. Don't underestimate the Spirit's power. There's a reason we're not praying alone.

Taking this time to pause and connect will help keep the prayer rooted in God. It'll make the whole prayer God-centered rather than self-centered. After all, you'll be praying a lot about your day, your blessings, your flaws, your future. It's easy for that to

slip into self-centeredness. Connecting with the Spirit, here at the start of the prayer, keeps the focus where it should be: on your relationship with God.

Try this, this week, with me. Take this first step into the most amazing prayer you've never heard of. This week, give me... give yourself... give God two minutes, every evening. Two minutes to pause. Two minutes to open yourself to the Spirit. Two minutes to connect. Two minutes to start building a whole new life of prayer.

*Prayer*