

### FOCUS VERSES

And Samuel said to the people, “Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart; and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way” (1 Samuel 12:20-23).

### OPENING HYMN

“O God in Heaven” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 748)

### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you have created all, claimed all cherished creatures, and always call new creation into being. Grant us now, in this moment, openness to know your will, trust your call, and heed your will and word. In the name of your risen Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

### BIBLE TEXT:

1 Samuel 12:12-23

### MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)
- Paper and pencils
- A white board, chalkboard or large paper for group questions

# Let us pray

Session one: The paradoxes of prayer

BY ANNA MADSEN

We are called to pray, but for what purpose? Can we persuade God with prayer? Do we actually encounter God in prayer? Is the practice of prayer intended for the sake of the one praying or for the One to whom we pray?

The Bible references all of these scenarios; however, each comes with biblical, theological and practical questions. In this first session on prayer, we’ll investigate the paradoxical truths of this spiritual practice.

■ **Read:** 1 Samuel 12:12-23

*“But when you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ though the Lord your God was your king. See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the Lord has set a king over you. If you will fear the Lord and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king. Now therefore take your stand and see this great thing that the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon the Lord, that he may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves.” So Samuel called upon the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that*

*day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. All the people said to Samuel, "Pray to the Lord your God for your servants, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves." And Samuel said to the people, "Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart; and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way."*

#### INTRODUCTION

This text from 1 Samuel comes at a turning point in the book. The people of Israel have begged Samuel to request a king on their behalf. Neither God nor Samuel were impressed by this request. Although they warned the people of the dangers of a king, ultimately Samuel and God relented, paving the way for the first King of Israel, Saul. In the passage for this session, Samuel appreciates that the people of Israel admit and repent of their demand for a king. Samuel promises that even so, he will pray on their behalf.

#### PARADOXICAL THOUGHT ONE

We pray to God, and sometimes God answers in ways that God would rather not.

Let's look at part of our text again:

■ **Read:** 1 Samuel 12:16-18

*"Now therefore take your stand and see this great thing that the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it*

*not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon the Lord, that he may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves." So Samuel called upon the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel.*

#### A SHIFT IN TRUST

In 1 Samuel 8:4-20, a background text for understanding 1 Samuel 12, the people of Israel pled with Samuel to beg God, on their behalf, for a king. They were noticing that the neighboring countries had rulers, and insofar as Israel didn't, they felt the odd one out. Up until that point, God had been Israel's king, so their request marked a shift not only in Israel's political structure but in the direction of Israel's trust.

Samuel did as they wanted, and God agreed to let Israel have a king. However, God commanded Samuel to first announce a warning: Turning toward an earthly king and away from God as King would bring misery and despair upon Israel.

The text from 1 Samuel 12, then, takes place after Israel got what they asked for: King Saul.

In 1 Samuel 12:16-17, Samuel is at the end of his prophetic vocation. But he's not quite content to leave without making this point one more time: God preferred prophets to kings.

Embedded in these verses, there's even a double-entendre we don't get in English. The Hebrew name of the king whom they demanded—"Saul"—means "to ask." Ultimately, in Saul they got what they asked for. In "Enter the Bible," an online resource from Luther Seminary, Old Testament scholar Mark Throntveit suggests that Samuel might even be a bit snarky in this exchange with Israel. "Does his voice drop with sarcasm as he sneers, 'Well, here's the king you have chosen?'" Throntveit asks. It appears that Samuel hasn't yet quite worked through his own feelings of offense!

So to remind Israel again of who is indeed king—and who has more sway with God than a mere earthly king—Samuel asked God to cause a storm in the middle of the hot and dry season of the harvest.

God was happy to oblige.

With flair, Samuel demonstrated that although Israel got what they asked for, faith in a king should not be trusted more than faith in God or, for that matter, faith in God's prophets.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

1. When are times that you prayed and received precisely what you didn't want?
2. Have you ever defied what you were fairly sure was God's intent for you?
3. Why might God 'give us up' to ourselves?
4. Are there occasions when God's hands are tied by the hardness of our hearts and the consequences of our choices?

**PARADOXICAL THOUGHT TWO**

We pray to God, both to change God and to be changed by God.

■ **Read:** 1 Samuel 12:19-23:

*All the people said to Samuel, "Pray to the Lord your God for your servants, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves." And Samuel said to the people, "Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your*

*heart; and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way.*

In contrast to the doom and gloom and threat of his warning in chapter 8, Samuel has finally caught Israel's attention. Here he seeks to comfort his people—people who are now afraid of the consequences of their insistence on a king. Not only are they afraid for the well-being of their nation, but for their well-being before the anger of the Lord.

Samuel's response is interesting: In Chapter 8 he is clearly ticked that Israel wanted a king more than a prophet—i.e., more than him.

However, here his heart seems to have softened.

There is almost a sense of a mother, fiercely angry at a child, who immediately relents of her fury when the child suddenly looks up with trembling lips and welling eyes, realizing what she or he had done wrong.

In this passage, Samuel the prophet, Samuel the truth-teller, becomes Samuel the comforter. Of greatest assurance, as a parting gift, Samuel promises to pray for Israel: "Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way."

This act of prayer is a two-fold piece, as Samuel describes it: 1) He will hold the people of God before God in prayer, advocating for their well-being (the Hebrew word for "pray" here is better understood as "intercede on behalf of,"); and 2) he will relay to Israel what he, in his prayers, has gleaned is God's will.

The editors of the *HarperCollins Study Bible* make an interesting footnote on the text at this point: "With the advent of kingship, the role of the

prophet in the new age is defined as twofold: the prophet will be an intercessory between Israel and the Lord and an advocate of morality and justice.”

My friend, Pastor Tim Olson, nicely frames the dynamic of verse 23 this way: “If prayer affects God, it affects the Body of God, and if it affects the Body of God, it affects God.”

Taking both 1 Samuel 8 and 1 Samuel 12 together, God does indeed hear prayer. However, in prayer God intends us to hear God.

If we do hear—and heed—God, a new reality is called into being that gives a new framework for the next prayer.

If we don’t hear—or heed—God, yet a different new reality is called into being, that gives a new framework for the next prayer too.

In this parting verse, Samuel wants to communicate to Israel that he will indeed cherish Israel in his heart and in his prayers and send their pleas to God on their behalf. However, intercession to God leads to instruction from God. God hears our prayers, and then responds to them: God’s will, namely what Samuel calls “the good and the right way.”

His vocation as prophet calls him to both pray on behalf of and offer God’s intentions for the people of God.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

5. Who serves as a prophetic voice in your congregation? In your family? In your nation?
6. What are ways in which God’s instruction is conveyed?
7. Can you think of occasions in your personal life or in your congregational life when God’s “good and right way” was heeded and or was not?

8. On what basis does the body of Christ determine whether they are hearing God’s will or their own will or the will of a king?

9. In very different eras and in very different contexts, Sojourner Truth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Leymah Gbowee served as prophetic voices to their communities and to their oppressors and detractors. On what basis do we evaluate these voices and others as prophetic and worthy of being heeded?

**CONCLUSION**

We often hear that God answers prayers. However, that doesn’t mean that God always answers our prayers as we want or as we expect. That said, these passages suggest that sometimes God *does* answer our prayers exactly as we frame them, even when God disagrees with our petition. There seems to be a relationship between our requests, the motivation for our requests and our willingness and ability to hear and respond to God’s response. Perhaps this passage invites us to consider the basis of our prayer requests, our receptivity to God’s word in return to us and our trust that, as Samuel says, “...the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself.”

**CLOSING PRAYER**

Gracious God, we give you thanks for your steadfast commitment to your people, even when we stray. Help us discern your will and heed it, and help us pray on behalf of your children and serve them, so that your righteousness may be seen and prevail. Amen.

**CLOSING HYMN**

“Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying,” (ELW 752) 

### SESSION MATERIALS

Bibles, pens, paint swatch strips or colored ribbons

### GOALS

To consider what our god/God is; to pay attention to those who pray and feel unheard; to offer opportunities to pray in community and alone.

# Let us pray

Session one: The paradoxes of prayer

BY ANNA MADSEN

### CONVERSATION TOPIC ONE: ALLEGIANCE

■ **Read Exodus 20:1-3:** *“Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”*

It’s not coincidental that the First Commandment of the Ten is, “You shall have no other gods than me.”

That is, God knew that there are options. Anything we consider to be most important—even in a passing moment—is our god; it’s the thing or the person to which we give our loyalty and our allegiance.

So when God said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me,” God was doing two things: identifying who God is by way of a history of liberation and acknowledging that even the saving event of the Exodus wouldn’t be sufficiently impressive to convince God’s people of unswerving loyalty; they would be (and are) chronically tempted by other gods.

Martin Luther defined a god as that in which or in whom we place our ultimate trust, namely the thing that in any given moment is most important to us.

It’s not always so easy to tell what is what and who is who, though. False gods can be sneaky. That is, it’s easy to identify malignant gods, things that can obviously destroy us: money, security, fame, addictions and so forth.

However, sometimes even benign things can become our gods: people who are key to us, for example, like children, partners or parents can become more important to us than anything else in the world.

Regardless of whether they are sneaky or obvious, a god demands loyalty or receives it from us whether it wants it or not. For example, if status becomes most important to us, then we sacrifice all of our identity to be defined by it: Our clothes, our house, our car all become expressions of our ultimate trust.

Sometimes these gods become ours without our consciously realizing it. For example, a woman named Valerie Saiving Goldstein, a graduate student in theology in the 1960s (that took chutzpah!) wrote a piece called “The Human Situation: A Feminine View.” In this article, she began to rethink—and even challenge—the foundational way that the Church, up until that point, had thought about sin. Moreover, she addressed it by way of gender stereotypes—a new, if not taboo, approach.

Saiving Goldstein wrote that traditionally, pride had been seen as the root of all sinfulness. Humility was therefore the antidote to pride.

But she raised the question of whether that paradigm works primarily for men.

In fact, Saiving Goldstein wondered, if you’re female, it may be that the matter is flipped: Thanks to cultural expectations of the role of women, accented all the more by a history of religious messages that women are to be subservient, the root of sinfulness is humility, and the antidote is pride.

The god of too much pride manifests itself in sins such as greed and will-to-power and violence, whereas the god of too much humility shows in tendencies toward manipulateness, passive-aggressiveness and gossip.

While we might see the stark delineation of male and female roles a bit too severe now, certainly in the ‘60s her observations resonated, and I think

one could make the case that today, her insight still offers wisdom.

And she makes another point: We sometimes don’t even see gods for what they are...or even that they are. Martin Luther will be helpful here. When Luther defined God, it’s worth noting that he didn’t say “Father/Son/Holy Spirit.” Instead, he said “...that in which we place our ultimate trust.” Luther was interpreting the First Commandment: It’s not that there aren’t other god-options, rather, it’s a matter of which god-option we will choose.

It’s helpful if we know that the word “ultimate” means last, or final. There’s a related word, however, that means the thing right *before* the ultimate: That word is “penultimate.”

People use both words all the time when they learn biblical Greek. It turns out that Greek has a lot of accent marks above words. Depending upon which syllable the accent mark sits above, the meaning of the word changes. So any student of Greek has to know that the “ultimate” syllable is the last syllable, and the “penultimate” syllable is the second-to-last syllable: For example, in the word “penultimate,” “-mate” is the ultimate syllable, and “-ti” is the *penultimate* syllable.

Luther is suggesting that sometimes we put our trust not in the ultimate (last/final) God (Father/Son/Holy Spirit), but rather in a penultimate (second-to-last) one (money, fame, security and so forth).

We make the ultimate penultimate and the penultimate ultimate. We make God into a god, and gods into God. In this passage from 1 Samuel, the people of Israel made their desire for a king their god: It was their ultimate goal. God and Samuel both knew that their trust in a king was misdirected.

Interestingly, Luther defined sin as misdirected trust: that is, when we trust in something that is not God as if it were. These texts from 1 Samuel may inspire some conversation about penultimate

gods that members of the Bible study might be worshipping—or tempted to worship—in their own lives.

Too, they might inspire conversations about the role of king (in our context, president) in our day and age.

While the U.S. president is understood to be a secular elected official, it shouldn't go unnoticed that our seal says, "In God We Trust."

Some interesting—and perhaps provoking—questions might concern how Christians should view allegiance to the U.S. president, particularly when it may contrast with our baptized allegiance to God.

#### CONVERSATION TOPIC TWO: PRAYERS THAT FEEL UNHEARD

📖 **Read:** Psalm 130

This session demands powerful and gentle attentiveness to people who have suffered, not least of all because their prayers have appeared to have gone unheard.

Think, for example, of the participant who has been unable to bear children, who has had a child die, who has experienced betrayal, sickness and solitude. Consider the one who has engaged in sin, who has trusted a false god and is uncertain of God's response and, even, love.

Psalm 130 was Luther's favorite psalm. He found it a great comfort when he himself suffered doubt (the German word is *Anfechtung*, which can't be well translated into English, but is a bit of a combination of doubt, despair and profound alienation).

Although most scholars believe that it was written by someone who has sinned, and therefore is fearful of God's wrath, it is a psalm that is occasionally used to comfort those who feel forgotten by God and entirely alone.

Verses 5-6 read:

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.*

While the psalmist ends in trusting God's love overcoming the sin, there may be those in this group who are still 'watching for the morning.'

Be at the ready to listen, be prepared to offer them comfort, and be alert to specific ways that their prayers can, in fact, be heard and translated into healing and hopeful action.

#### CLOSING ACTIVITIES

1. The North Carolina Synod of the ELCA posted a creative idea to Pinterest about communal prayer: Gather paint chips or swatches in an array of color schemes and shades, the likes of which you find in a paint aisle display to take home and compare hues.

Invite people to write their prayers on the swatches, finding colors to represent the emotions associated with the prayers.

Consider cutting each prayer into an individual square. You might invite someone in your group with an artistic eye to assemble them into a figure, perhaps to be hung as liturgical art in the narthex or even sanctuary. You might also invite the rest of the congregation to participate.

Using the same principle, you may substitute colored ribbons for this activity, using permanent marker to write prayers on the ribbon. These could be assembled into a mobile.

2. Because often prayer is experienced as speaking to God, but not letting God speak, it might be interesting to provide a way for those attending this study to intentionally listen for God.

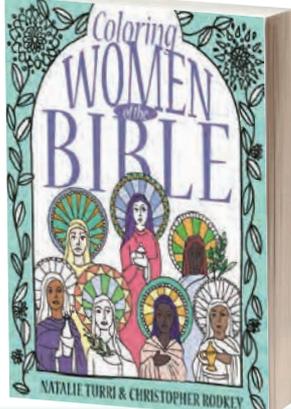
One way of doing that is to invite the women to take some paper and a writing instrument and find a quiet place to pray.

After they have settled into their spot, invite them to write their name, with a colon after it. Following the colon, ask them to write what they would like to offer to God in prayer. Then have them take some time to listen for God's response.

When they are ready, have them write down God's name, and a colon, and then what they believe God has to say to them.

This written conversation can go on for as long as it is helpful. It can be a powerfully effective way to listen not only more clearly to God, but to oneself before God. It can happen that during this dialogue, clarity emerges both in terms of what one determines one feels or wants to express, and in terms of what one believes God's will for oneself to be: The act of writing down what one believes God is saying is a moving and humbling experience!

Depending on the level of trust within the group, the participants could be invited back to share what they have experienced. 🌿

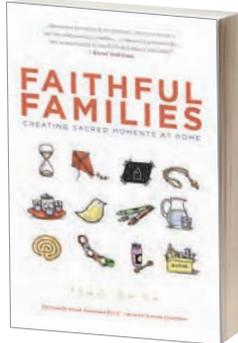


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### THEME VERSE

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer (Psalm 19:14).*

### OPENING HYMN

“When Long before Time”  
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 861)

### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, we come before you with our voices, aware that you also hear voices of those whom we will never meet, never hear—and perhaps we do not hear them although they are right before us. Grant us your presence here, so that we may add our praise to theirs, add our laments to theirs, add our voices to theirs. May we also hear your voice. We give you thanks that our brokenness is not a barrier to relationship with you. We ask that you remind us of both your higher intentions for us and your promise that no matter what, you love us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

# Let us pray

Session two: The practices of prayer  
BY ANNA MADSEN

Jesus taught us how to pray by way of the Lord’s Prayer. But in Scripture and in the Christian tradition, people of faith have developed a wide variety of ways to come before God. In this session, we’ll look at different reasons and ways to pray, what each might offer and how knowing an array of prayer styles can enrich our devotional life.

### 📖 Read: Psalm 19

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.*

*In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes out like a bridegroom from his  
wedding canopy, and like a strong man  
runs its course with joy.  
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them;  
and nothing is hid from its heat.*

*The law of the Lord is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the Lord are sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the Lord are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is clear,*

*enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the Lord is pure,  
enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true  
and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey,  
and drippings of the honeycomb.*

*Moreover by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.  
But who can detect their errors?  
Clear me from hidden faults.  
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;  
do not let them have dominion over me.  
Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation  
of my heart be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

## INTRODUCTION

Many of us have heard the last verse of Psalm 19 spoken before a pastor preaches in worship: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

In fact, these beloved words originally were not an isolated prayer, but rather the closing of a longer hymn.

The author C.S. Lewis called this hymn, Psalm 19, “the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.”

By majestically weaving images that are typically considered to be opposites (heaven and earth; day and night; silence and voice; the justice and goodness of God and the fear that one falls short of pleasing God), the psalm praises God who speaks through nature and knowledge. It becomes a trifecta-hymn

of praise, dedication and trust. For us, it might even serve as a springboard for venturing into new forms of prayer and seeing prayer as possible in new ways.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PRAY?

📖 **Read:** Psalm 19:14

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation  
of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my  
rock and my redeemer.*

### Share aloud or reflect:

1. Is there a right way to pray?
2. Conversely, is there a *wrong* way to pray?
3. For that matter, what even *counts* as prayer?

When it comes to what it means to pray, even the disciples aren’t clear—or, at least, they aren’t clear about how Jesus understands prayer, and therefore how they, as his followers, should too. In Luke 11, for example, they said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray!”

It’s important to note that Jesus’ disciples asked this question in large part because every rabbi had a distinguishing prayer that revealed not only the rabbi’s agenda, but the rabbi’s understanding of *God’s* agenda.

Then, as now, it seems that in its most basic understanding, prayer is a communication conduit between a person and God.

That’s a basic take.

But prayer can confound even the most faithful of people.

Google helps make the point. A search of “How to pray” gives a person links to countless webpages, even including pages of check-off lists like: “Five Tips to Pray,” “Six Tips to Pray,” and “Nine Tips to Pray.”

(As an aside, I did not take time to see if these tips overlapped from one numbered list to another or if there are a sum total of 20 prayer tips that can be found in just the first page of Google hits!)

As it turns out, some people don't seem to need these tips. For example, my late husband was an excellent pray-er, particularly in public situations. I, on the other hand, was (and am) not, and happily deferred to him. Every. Single. Time. (In return, I promised to help him with his sermon prep, which was not particularly *his* long, strong suit, so it all worked out, professionally *and* personally!)

The closing verse to Psalm 19, which is the foundational text for this Bible study, may come in as a handy occasion for grace and freedom, as we—those of us who pray easily and naturally, and those of us who don't—think through the act of prayer.

It's fair to say that Psalm 19:14 is the culmination not just of this psalm but of the writer's understanding of both God and humanity. In it, the psalmist trusts God enough to come before God with a prayer. Given the era of kingship in which the psalm was written, the act of addressing a ruler, let alone God, was truly courageous, if not audacious.

That isn't to say that the hymn writer felt like a BFF (or "best friend forever") toward God; quite the contrary is true. The last verse expresses nothing but humility before the Creator.

Humility mixed with confidence might be a way of understanding these words and a broad approach to thinking through prayer.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

4. Do you remember being taught to pray? Who taught you? How did this person or people teach you to pray?
5. Do you pray in the same way yet today, or do you pray in a different way? Do you vary your prayer life?

6. Does your notion of who God is affect your style of prayer or when you pray?

#### **PRAYER IS AN ACT OF PRAISE**

📖 **Read:** Psalm 19:1-6

*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*

*Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.*

*There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;*

*yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

*In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,*

*which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.*

*Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.*

The religious groups surrounding the Israelites tended to believe that natural elements were gods: there was the god of the waters (Nammu) who created the sky (An) and the earth (Ki). The gods, then, often took the form of natural elements: sun, sea and earth, for example.

Knowing this, one can read Genesis 1 in a new way: Rather than depicting ancient Israel *worshipping* the sun and the sea and the earth as its neighbors did, this story asserts that God *made* the sun and the sea and the earth.

That's a big difference.

Ancient Israelites didn't worship nature: They worshipped God who *made* nature.

With enough imagination, one can almost hear the writer of Genesis saying to the polytheist at the neighborhood BBQ, "Oh yeah? Well, our God *made* your gods!"

The impact and import of this differing theological take can't be overestimated—and can't be completely unpacked in this session. However, for our purposes, it's clear that in the Israelite tradition, straight from the get-go, creation and all things in it are believed to be *made* by God (as opposed to *being* God).

In the same way, the psalmist begins this psalm by saying that the sky and the earth—*not* God, but *created* by God—relay the wonder of God even beyond human perception.

Even the earth and the sky and the sun, themselves inanimate, cannot contain their gratitude and praise; they are animated by love for God.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. When you feel compelled to praise God, what moves you?
8. Do you find yourself more often praying spontaneously or at a regular time? Why?
9. Does nature inspire you to prayer? Does it inspire you to pray differently than you would in a church or at home?

**PRAYER IS AN ACT OF ORIENTATION**

📖 **Read:** Psalm 19: 7-11

*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;*

*the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;*

*the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.*

*More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.*

*Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

The word "cacophony" comes from a Greek word, *kakophonia*, which means "harsh sound." In English, it still carries that sense, but also the impression of a lot of different sounds that together make for discord.

Often, the moment we open our eyes, our ears—and, I believe, our spirits—we are greeted by cacophony. Tweets, texts, email, Facebook posts, tasks, phone calls—but also guilt, regret and grief, as well as hopes, goals and vocational calls—all clamor for our attention.

The verses of Psalm 19 seem to invite us to still these sounds.

In contrast to everything else that is imperfect, depleting, unsure and unwise; wrong, discouraging, cloudy and obscuring; impure, momentary, false and wicked, you can count on God to orient you to that which is just and worthy of your trust.

All sorts of metaphors can be used to make an analogy. For example, prayer can be a laser beam in a cloud, a loud voice through a din, a locator ping for a lost device.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

10. What are competing claims in your world?

11. How do you find prayer to re-claim your attention, your priorities, yourself?

#### PRAYER IS AN ACT OF TRUST

📖 **Read:** Psalm 19:12

*But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.*

This verse is reminiscent of a passage from Martin Luther's favorite psalm, Psalm 130: "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?"

In both texts, the psalmist comes before God in complete humility.

The author is fully aware that one can neither comprehend one's own sinfulness, nor God's majesty.

Perhaps we can grasp the awe when we imagine being allowed to speak with one whom we admire. I have an image of Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man, all of whom were bold as bold can be...until they found themselves before the Great Oz, when they buckled in fear!

Even so, however, the psalmist engages God.

Perhaps these verses invite us to be reminded of the awe-someness of God.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard writes in *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (Harper & Row, 1982) that it's "madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

In this passage, Dillard tries to invoke something of the psalmist's awe. We have the audacity to come before God. The word "audacity" comes from Latin meaning bold, rash and foolhardy!

True though that might be, still the psalmist (and we) humbly-yet-audaciously come before God in prayer because we trust that even though God *could* smite us, God doesn't.

#### Share aloud or reflect:

12. How does your image of God shape your prayer to God?
13. Do you think that we have become too familiar with God?
14. How does one's prayer change because of the space in which one prays? For example, would you pray differently in a gothic cathedral, a wood-frame church on the prairie, around a campfire, at the table, beside your bed?

#### PRAYER IS AN ACT OF LAMENT

📖 **Read (yes, once again):** Psalm 19:14

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Half of my vocation as a freelance theologian is dedicated to my work at OMG: Center for Theological Conversation. I'm often asked what "OMG" stands for, and when I answer, not all people are pleased!

OMG stands for exactly what it does anyplace else: Oh My God. The thing of it is, that phrase is used all the time in Scripture in very different, yet very holy ways: as praise, as a question, as affirmation and as lament.

After an accident killed my husband and gave my son a brain injury, I "got" lament. I'd *studied* it before, but I finally, experientially, "got" it, just as I suddenly "got" another form of biblical writing called apocalyptic writing. In each of these forms of prayer, people pray to God with grief, with hopelessness, with despair and even with anger.

It's not too often that we find room for such prayer in public worship, but I suspect that it is often expressed in private.

Some might feel as if this form of prayer is an act of un-faith, and even of disrespect toward God.

Others, however, and certainly many biblical writers, felt that such prayer is just the opposite—an act of vibrant, radical faith.

This psalmist doesn't engage in lament, exactly, but nonetheless, the last verse reveals radical trust after an expression not only of praise and humility, but of fear.

It's as if the psalmist says to God, "I come before you aware of my lack of trust and my disbelief. See in that my trust and my belief, for I still come before you."

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

15. Lament prayers tend to be heard in church during Lent. There is no one season, however, for lament. Would you like to see room for lament during other times of the church year in corporate worship?
16. How do you feel about expressing anger and despair toward God? Is it, in your mind, an act of faith or of unfaith?
17. Are there people or places with whom or where you feel more comfortable lamenting? Why?

#### **CONCLUSION**

Just as life is not one-dimensional, neither is prayer. The variety of life's experiences can stir within us different reasons to pray and different ways to pray. In the same vein, one person's favored forms of prayer may not be another person's. Our text gives us a range of experiences of God and reasons for communication with God. It culminates in a final

verse of hope that no matter the reason for prayer or the manner of prayer, God will listen and attend.

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Gracious God, you are with us in all of our moments. In them we experience the range of hope and despair; joy and grief; confusion and clarity; community and loneliness; faithfulness and sinfulness; trust and uncertainty. Give us the confidence to come before you in prayer in trust and transparency, lead us to avenues of connection with you that bring us closer to you and bring us closer to your will for us. In your name we pray. Amen.

#### **CLOSING HYMN**

"Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright" (*ELW* 745)

#### **OPTIONAL CLOSING ACTIVITY**

See leader guide. 🌿

## SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To understand the reasons why we pray; the way we pray; when, where and to whom we pray; and how practices of prayer can enrich our lives.
- To create different objects that may encourage prayer life in a variety of ways.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals
- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- For the optional labyrinth activity in this guide: Crocheted labyrinth designs found online, one yarn skein and one crochet hook for each participant, or (for the fabric labyrinth) sharpies, felt or heavy fabric, heavy yarn, fabric glue, labyrinth designs found online.
- For the optional coloring activity: 1 package of white index cards (unlined), color markers or colorful pencils.
- For the optional prayer stone or incense necklace in this guide: cookie sheet, permanent marker, craft clay (or craft pebbles), small cutters in various sizes (bottle caps, rings, small cookie cutters), rollers with patterns, leather straps, cocktail straws; felt or other heavy fabric, heavy yarn, fabric glue.

# Let us pray

Session two: The practices of prayer

BY ANNA MADSEN

## TOPIC ONE: A LIFE OF CONSTANT PRAYER

📖 **Read:** Psalm 141:2

*Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.*

The senses have been a powerful element of prayer life, across religious belief systems. This well-known passage from various liturgies is taken from Psalm 141.

In congregations where incense is used, some worshipers find that its presence by way of smoke and fragrance saturates the worship space (and the senses) with the inescapable reminder of God's presence. However, it is important to be aware that many people today have fragrance allergies, asthma or other conditions that keep incense from being an option.

Churches often use visual art to create a devotional, calming environment for prayer. This can be seen in the use of stained glass, wall hangings, banners, icons, paintings, sculptures, calligraphy and any number of artistic installations in the worship space. A number of churches also engage the senses with liturgical dance, a walkable prayer labyrinth or other interactive artistic activities.

One cannot be chronically in a state of prayer: Work does need to be done, groceries do have to be bought, clothes do need to be washed, relationships do need intentional time.

However, sometimes a simple reminder of one's constant dependence on God can give us pause for a short prayer of gratitude.

For women in your Bible study group, this study might give an opening for conversation about com-

peting claims on their lives, obstacles to prayer and even guilt about a lack of prayer.

This time together offers opportunity for support, consolation, encouragement, and, of course, prayer for specific needs and concerns. Take that time to pray together as needed—actually praying together is, after all, the most important part of our study.

#### TOPIC TWO: PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER

The author Annie Dillard shares in *Holy the Firm* (Harper & Row, 1977) that the pastor at a church she attended shocked the congregation when he stopped in the middle of praying for world leaders, grieving people and those who are oppressed, and “burst out, ‘Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week,’” she said. “...Because of this, I like him very much.”

This passage reveals what many people, even in your group, might feel about prayer. We pray and pray and pray. Yet still the world suffers injustices, still people remain sick or die, still despair exists.

As a leader, realize that this hour might give an opportunity for expression of some justified cynicism about prayer.

There is tension here even about corporate prayer: There is a risk that the Prayers of the People can be a passive “Announcement to the People”—a way of addressing a message to the community rather than to God.

By the same token, God doesn’t act without the involvement of God’s people. God is, in a sense, dependent on our actions to bring about some change. For example, we can pray about poverty, but until unjust laws and systems are changed or people donate money, food and clothing, people will still be poor.

This study might provide an opportunity about how prayer “works.” To what degree is public prayer (or should it be) a way of re-grounding and therefore mobilizing the people of God to do the work of God?

#### OPTIONAL CLOSING ACTIVITIES (CHOOSE ONE)

##### Labyrinth

Using a design for a labyrinth online ([gathermagazine.org/fingerlab/](http://gathermagazine.org/fingerlab/)), have participants create their own small labyrinth by either sewing, crocheting or simply cutting out a circle of fabric as big around as your hand, and tracing a pattern on which to glue a complementary shade of yarn.

##### Coloring prayers

Give each participant a plain white index card, colorful markers, pencils and pens. Ask each to write in large letters one or two words of gratitude or supplication to God. Then ask them to color a background around the words, using color markers or pencils. Add stripes, polka-dots, swirls, cross-hatches, etc. Make sure your words are still legible. Place the card where you will see it every day, and let it remind you to pray.

##### Incense necklaces or prayer stones

Ask each participant to roll, cut or form a small piece of baking clay into a shape suitable either for a necklace or a pocket stone. (Note: For necklaces, use a cocktail straw to make a hole in the stone prior to baking.)

Bake designs on a cookie sheet, according to the directions on the package of clay.

After the stone cools, use a permanent marker to write a meaningful message on the stone.

For the necklaces, if participants are not sensitive to fragrances or oils, they can place small drops of essential oils on top of the stone every day or so at home, as a reminder to “let my prayer be counted as incense before you.” 🌿

**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. 🙏