

Prayer as Relationship



BY STEVEN H. SHUSSETT

When someone is asked what it is she seeks in prayer, worship or her faith, the response often is an uncomfortable silence. These are things that we do, perhaps because we were told to do them or because they feel familiar, but often without reflection as to why. Some people may suggest that these are in pursuit of being with Jesus or closer to God. “Being closer to God” is easy to say, but this can be a frightening notion for many Christians.

At one extreme is the misunderstanding that to be that close to God through Christ means that we somehow cease to exist. Paul answers this fear in *2 Corinthians 5:17*, saying, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” The promise is that in life, death and after death we are with God.

At the other end of the spectrum is the fear that many feel when it comes to intimacy with other people, let alone God. Vulnerability, dependence and silence can be sources of apprehension, even dread, in large part because these are characteristic of being out of control. Relating intimacy to a lack of control is accurate—there is a necessary “letting go,” especially when it comes to deepened love with God.

Knowing that being with God is not cause for fear, how then



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are you?” but hardly wait for or expect an answer. When that person is right in front of you, then you think about them. When Sunday worship is the only time we think of or talk to God, how is it different from thinking of the mail carrier only at your mailbox? When we are shy around

do we *practice* being with God? What does it mean to be intimate with God, and how does that come to pass?

“I in them and you in me” (*John 17:23a*)

What does it mean to be in a relationship with a person? At its most basic, you listen to the other person and he or she listens to you. Or you are with one another, you react to the other, and she or he responds in kind.

Thomas Keating suggests in *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) that human relationships provide a very meaningful metaphor for our relationship with God. He suggests that the way we are with people is a lens on how we are, or could be, with God, and in turn, how God is with us. If that sounds bold, then reflect on how you describe prayer. If it means listening to God, or speaking with God, compare that with how we characterize relationships with people.

Think about our acquaintances, those people with whom we exchange a quick “Hello,” or “How

strangers, allowing others to do all of the talking, is that really poles apart from having the pastor do all of our praying for us?

“Everything has become new” (*2 Corinthians 5:1b*)

Over time, however, some people come to be friends. We acquire a deeper knowledge of someone’s life, and at best, an awareness that they really are there for us. More time is spent together, and vulnerabilities are revealed. So it is with God. Our prayer moves from talking *to* God to speaking *with* God. We begin to live in the awareness of God’s presence. Anything can be said without fear that the relationship will be broken off because of our failings. At the same time, however, like the dearest of friends, God calls us to confession and points out our dangerous behaviors. We come to know that God is for us, and as Paul promises, we become new because of that.

Then, if so blessed, we may find ourselves in a relationship of intimacy. This is marked by self-surrender, putting the other ahead of the self—exactly what Jesus did

for us, and what he calls us to do for others. While every relationship requires work, little effort is needed to sustain this kind of intimacy. A simple word or gesture can say so much, to the point where words are often not even necessary. The classic illustration is of an old married couple on a porch swing, spending hours together but saying nothing, not because they have nothing to say, but because nothing needs to be said. Simply being together is enough—and so it can be with God.

“A wise child loves discipline” (Proverbs 13:1a)

All prayer is relationship, but many prayers also discipline us to be aware of God. We cannot make God speak with us, but we can allow ourselves to be put into a position where we can hear when God does have something to say. Without a slow, prayerful, methodical and scriptural approach to life’s big issues, how can we discern God’s will for us?

For many, the word *discipline* conjures up the image of a misbehaving child, or a puppy that has not

Journal or Group Discussion Questions

What kind of a relationship do I want to have with God? Of the things God likes to do, in what am I being called to participate? Have I received invitations from God that are particularly interesting or frightening—invitations to engage in spiritual practices that may be unfamiliar to me?

Scripture passage: *John 17:6–26*; alternative: *Isaiah 43:1–7*

been housebroken—a matter of correction or punishment. But at its heart, discipline is training or instruction, a way that we learn. So how do we learn to be in a deeper relationship with God? We might just as well ask how to maintain a good relationship with family and friends. Make time to be with them, and plan to do things you have learned that they like to do. You sit and talk, or just sit. You do things for others together, working in a soup kitchen on Saturday night or

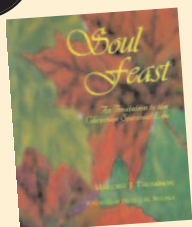
praying for the world on Sunday morning. Even things that many overlook, like having meals in common, have weight. Many commitments and responsibilities compete for your time, but you are disciplined about the time you spend with those you love.

Through the next months, we will be exploring a variety of spiritual disciplines, from simple, everyday practices that help open our eyes to the extraordinary in the ordinary, to new ways of thinking about and loving God. A relationship with the Holy One, like that with a person, requires much of us, but fundamentally that we are who God made us to be. To be honest with God, others and ourselves requires much of us to be sure, but it is truly the pearl of great price.

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Resources



Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life
By Marjorie J. Thompson
Louisville, Ky.: Westminster
John Knox, 2005

The Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation

Lord, Teach Us to Pray is a resource published by the Office of Spiritual Formation on different methods of prayer. To order, call Presbyterian Distribution Service at 800/524-2612; item 70-440-04-001; \$10 plus shipping and handling.

Hungryhearts is the Office of Spiritual Formation’s quarterly periodical on spirituality. Free subscriptions are available through www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation or by calling 888/728-7228, ext. 5306.

The Thoughtful Christian

This Web resource center offers resources on contemporary issues, popular culture, the Bible and theology, Christian living and spirituality. Steven H. Shussett’s “What Is Reformed Spirituality?” will be available February 1, 2006, when the Web site launches. Studies are available for individual purchase, block purchase or annual subscription. Visit www.thethoughtfulchristian.com for more information.