

# The ABC's of Prayer

Making Prayer a Meaningful Part of Daily Life

“When the church is no longer teaching the people how to pray,  
we could almost say it will have lost its reason for existence”

- Richard Rohr

Part 1:

## *The Importance of Respect*

August 15, 2010

Luke 18.1-7

I believe that many members of our congregations carry a huge number of wonderful questions about prayer that they are afraid to ask. I also suspect that many people feel guilty about their prayer lives. The ministry of a praying congregation is to help people prepare their hearts for prayer.

- Jane Vennard

### *Reading*

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup>In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” ’ <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?’

Early this spring our faith community was assailed by a number of unexpected deaths. During that difficult season of grief, one of our own commented on Facebook that she would not have made it through this storm without the constant assurance of prayers from this congregation. What a telling statement this is. It is prayer that helps us through such times; and

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beyond this, prayer affords us the vision and courage to walk with faith's integrity through any valley that opens out before us. It has been said that if the church is not teaching the people how to pray, it will have lost its reason for existence. This is another way of saying the same thing; that prayer lies at the heart of what it means to be a faith community, and that we, as a people of faith, should be ever and always about prayer. So we turn our attention once again to the topic of prayer.

Personal tragedy aside, these are difficult days to be church. Clearly the world is becoming less and less receptive to our message, and is at times dismissive of our efforts and suspicious of our motives. Even within the safety of our four walls we face significant issues. While working diligently to adapt our message and invitation to ever changing situations, we face the need to repair, replace, and renovate large swaths of our campus to complement that invitation and accommodate our ministry.

To state the matter succinctly, we need prayer at the heart of our life together. Nevertheless, recent circumstances simply underscore an *abiding* need to pray. We need prayer to be the people of God, and to sustain the ministry God envisions for us. So we turn our attention once again to the topic of prayer. As I mentioned earlier, I intend to examine the rudiments of prayer, Prayer 101 or, as this series title states, *The ABC's of Prayer*. I'm not concerned with our ability to stand before the people and utter eloquent prayers to God, prayers that will impress anyone within earshot. Nor am I concerned with encouraging ecstatic prayer experiences that hurl us beyond our normal existence to the mountaintop. I *am* concerned, however, with encouraging and empowering us to live each and every day in an attitude of prayer.

This is where the efficacy of prayer is put to the test time and again; right smack dab in the middle of our everyday, often boring, overscheduled, hectic, and always demanding life. It is the basics of prayer we need to master; it is the everydayness of prayer that we need to insure the meaning and quality of our life. And just here we are hesitant and insecure. In my estimation Jane Vennard is right in noting that many of us have questions about prayer we are afraid to ask. We're supposed to have a mature prayer life already, aren't we? What would folk think if I admitted to having questions, blind spots, and a real sense of insecurity about the

quality of my prayer life? Such are the questions we would hear if folk were given permission to be human and speak their heart. That's what I want to accomplish during this series. I want you to feel comfortable exploring your prayer life, your understanding of prayer, and your practice of prayer without guilt, starting right where you are. No shame, no guilt, and no holier than thou taunts will be allowed.

If we can get over this hurdle, perhaps we will enhance our prayer life; perhaps we will be more comfortable with prayer. This is the first step, you know... being comfortable with prayer. Prayer is not about eloquent metaphors and dramatic, booming voices. Prayer is not about demonstrating an advanced level of theological understanding. Prayer is not about inspiring others with passion and commitment. Prayer is about being with God, talking with God, sharing with God. Prayer is living in God's presence, living out a relationship with God, and like any relationship, it begins with the simple things like, thank you, I'm sorry, and I love you.

Would you like a reason to pray? Why not just to let God know you love him? Prayer should be just that simple; prayer should be the simple, open, and honest expression of who we are every day. If you're feeling happy, let God know it. If you're feeling sad, let God help. If you're angry, tell God. Prayer should be as natural to us as breathing in and breathing out because that's truly what it is. Think about it; if God is in our presence, if God is within and among and above and below and before and behind, then we breathe God in and out every moment of every day. Prayer is simply being aware of this presence and, I might add, taking advantage of the opportunity it offers us.

During this series, then, we will examine the basics of prayer so that we'll be more comfortable with our prayer life. We're going to consider several topics over the next few weeks, and I encourage you to let me know if you have questions about prayer, or if there are particular aspects of prayer you would like us to consider. Just get them to me one way or another and I will be sure to include them.

The topics I plan to consider include one that I call, *There Is no I in Prayer*. Coaches of team sports are fond of reminding their players that there is no I in team, and that they should work hard to insure the success of the team, even at the expense of their own. Prayer is the same. Prayer is never simply about me, it's always about us. Thus, we should never pray for our

benefit at the expense of others; rather, we should pray from a perspective that includes ourselves and others. We might as well, because God's response *will* include others. God is always and only interested in win-win situations; that is to say, situations in which the needs of all involved are met.

In addition, we will consider a topic I call, *In the Beginning*. This topic evokes the image of creation and the origin of the universe; but I want to consider the creative activity of God only as it affects the beginning of our day, the beginning of our everyday. I won't speak for you, but my days invariably unwind more smoothly when I begin them in prayer, when I begin by taking time to be with God. There's just something about beginning a day with the recognition that God is with us, and that we depend on God for all good things. In addition, our day needs forgiveness, grace, and a healthy dose of courage to stay the course. It's important to spend time with God first thing in the morning; and it's equally important to confer with God continually through the day concerning its needs. Do this and I promise you, your day will change completely. Start the day with an awareness of God's presence and with the faith conviction that God is going to be an active part of your day, and it will truly be a new day, just like the first day.

We will examine these topics in the coming weeks. Today we will begin with a consideration of the *importance of respect* in prayer. I would be remiss if I didn't mention Rodney Dangerfield at this point, the stand-up comedian who never *got no respect* from anyone. With all due respect, however, I'm not concerned with the respect Rodney, or you, or I receive from others. I'm concerned about the respect we show for God and for ourselves.

The importance of respect in prayer has nothing to do with stern and somber attitudes, or circling God like tip-toing around grandma's sick bed. There's plenty of that going around. I'll never forget the times I was scolded as a child for running in the isles of the sanctuary. This is God's house, some respectful lady would remind me soberly, and you have to be quiet, reverent in it. Again, I can still see the somber faces of a search committee with whom I met while in seminary. They were, to a person, so tight-laced and stern that I was almost afraid to breathe in their midst. And make no mistake; their severity sucked all the energy out of the

room. There was no joy; there was no recognition that faith is a celebration. For them it was all about some misplaced notion of respect.

Of course we should include respect in our prayers, and that respect starts with God. But respect has nothing to do with severity. Rather, it has everything to do with... well, let's put it in terms of the ABC's, OK? We shouldn't treat God like a nitwit when we pray. Let me cite an example. You no doubt remember the so-called foxhole prayer in which a half-crazed soldier promises God to be a saint from that point on if only God would save him from the current situation. Oh, please! Do you really think God is hoodwinked by such a promise? God knows our hearts. God knows if we're trying to manipulate Him or trying to get our petty little way. So let's show some respect. Let's assume that the creator of the Universe understands something of what we need in our life, and what will make our lives more meaningful. It's downright disrespectful to treat God like he can be manipulated, fooled, or tricked into doing something against his will. Respect, on the other hand, means praying with openness and honesty, and listening at least as much as we talk.

If we tend to disrespect God in our prayers, we tend even more to disrespect ourselves. By this I mean that we think of ourselves as unworthy of God's attention. How many times have you heard someone wonder aloud if her or his prayer even reached the ceiling of the room, much less the ears of God? This is but another way of showing disrespect for ourselves. The truth is, the good news is, that our prayers don't have to reach the ears of God, because God is with us, always attuned to our voices. And we don't have to deserve God's attention, because God doesn't treat us on the basis of what we deserve, but of what we need.

This is the point Jesus makes in the story of the unjust judge. Jesus doesn't compare God to an unjust judge. He points out that if a corrupt court magistrate will finally give in to whines and protestations and do what the woman demands, how much more will a God who loves you respond to your prayers? Going to God in prayer is not a matter of being worthy; it's a matter of recognizing that God loves you. Have respect for yourself. You are a child of God and you mean the world to God. Even if you have committed what you consider to be the most egregious sin possible in the history of humankind, do not hesitate to go to God in prayer,

because God will respond. God has respect for you, God loves you, so for goodness sake, respect yourself.

We also disrespect ourselves in prayer when we assume there's no way God could have confidence in us; no way could God see us making any contribution to the realization of his vision. So we sit back and wait for God to do... well, everything. It's easy to be incompetent, because it absolves us of any and all responsibility. It's up to God to take hold of our strings and play us like puppets. Oh, God, do this. Oh, God, do that. God, make this happen... come on! Let's show ourselves some respect. God wants us to be a part of realizing the kingdom in our midst.

We can pray fervently for God to heal someone, or deliver someone from a difficult situation, but until we make ourselves available to help God – to let God heal through us; to let God deliver through us - our prayers are disrespectful. God wants to partner with us. God respects us and wants us to buy into his vision. He wants us to be a part of the healing process; thus, we should respect ourselves by being available to support others, by listening when someone has problems, or by offering that proverbial cup of cold water Jesus speaks of.

Respect is so very important in our prayer life. Respect for God, to be sure, God who knows our every need. And respect for ourselves as well, we who have been chosen to partner with God in the movement of grace into our world. God is no dim wit, and we are not puppets; and together we can bring to life the request we make every week when we pray our Lord's prayer, *Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.*

Part 2:  
*A Beginner's Mind*

Matthew 6.25-33

August 22, 2010

Give me, O my Creator, a beginner's mind to play with this new day that has dawned. With a beginner's mind, fresh and open, I can see countless ways to explore the promise these hours hold, as a gift from you.

- Edward Hays

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" 32For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

My first, and probably most formative, theology professor was Morris Ashcraft. Most students remember him for his outrageously high grading scale. To earn an A one had only to average 96% on all class assignments and tests. When asked to explain this golden standard, the former fighter pilot simply explained that there are two things in life in which there is virtually no margin for error; flying a fighter plane and studying theology. Needless to say, he wasn't the most popular professor on campus.

While most students remember him for his grading scale, I remember him for his fishing stories. Each summer this meticulously dressed, disciplined professor gathered with several colleagues at a remote camp in Canada for two weeks of fishing. No wives, no books, no phones... just fishing. Dr. Ashcraft had two simple rules for these two weeks; he didn't shave

and he didn't pray. On the first night in camp, he would retire to his sleeping bag and pray, "God, this is Morris. I'm fishing now; I'll talk to you in two weeks."

His attitude always makes for a good story, but it doesn't make much of a model for prayer. It's one thing to give up ritual prayer or even conversational prayer for a time; but think of the opportunities he would miss to commune with God in nature, to simply *be* with God in a situation like this; far removed from the frantic pace and inbred pressures of everyday life, surveying the snowcapped mountains or listening to the water surging through the rapids. My point is this; prayer is so much more than talking to God. Prayer is not conversation at a distance – as Dr. Ashcraft knew very well – but a lived relationship with a God who is intimately close. Let's pray together to our present God, and then we'll examine this idea a bit more.

God, show us the true nature of prayer during this time together; share with us the warm embrace of your loving presence; the guidance, companionship, and comfort, all day - every day - in your grace. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

Prayer is so much more than conversation at a distance. Prayer is relationship. Prayer is being with God. In fact, if understood exclusively as conversation at a distance, prayer has no more chance of succeeding than romance at a distance. Has anyone ever tried to maintain a romance at a distance? If so you know that, more times than not, it just doesn't fly; it unravels at one point or another because even though you can chat on the phone, you can talk from a distance, you're not together. You can't feel the warmth and support of that relationship.

Relationship is so much more than conversation at a distance. Relationship is about presence, about being together, and the relationship doesn't stand much chance of surviving if you're not together. My relationship with Christina once withstood the strain of distance, but I certainly felt that strain; I sensed the potential difficulty of keeping the relationship alive over a long period of time. When I studied in France as part of my graduate program, I arrived early for intensive language study while Chris stayed in the states to save money to augment my scholarship. For six weeks or so I was a stranger in a strange land; I didn't speak the language and had no friends. I called Chris often, and wrote her almost every day; but it wasn't the same as being together.

During this lonely period I divided my time between two activities, studying French and playing my guitar. I wrote song after song, expressing my feelings, exploring my situation, and

celebrating my relationship with Chris. I wrote her a song by the way... the only song I've ever dedicated to her. This song that I named *Little Things* expressed my feelings of loneliness and my desire to be together again. I would like to play this song for you, so you can hear the longing and love it expresses.

Little things I haven't said  
in oh, so long a while  
Come to me at midnight  
I awaken with a smile.

I think of all the times that we will share along the way  
I think of all the little things to you I want to say  
Oh, I love you girl.

Long distance relationships don't stand much chance of succeeding because they need presence and togetherness. The same is true of prayer. Prayer is not a long distance conversation with God. Surely you have heard folk say, "Oh, I pray and pray and pray, but I just don't know if my prayers rise above the ceiling, much less find the ear of God." There are several questionable assumptions in this expression. The first is that their prayer has to rise above the ceiling at all; that God is removed from us, frolicking in some distant corner of the universe oblivious to our concerns. God is present to and with us, and our prayers don't have to find their way to God. The second questionable assumption is that we have to coax God into paying attention to us. In truth, we don't invite God to prayer; God invites us, and we simply have to respond to that invitation by opening our heart. Finally, this expression assumes that prayer is about conversation. We ask... God provides; short and sweet. While conversation may very well be involved in prayer, prayer is more about being in a living relationship with God. Prayer is not all about listing concerns and celebrations ...as important as that is. When it occurs, conversation takes place within the context of an intimate, loving relationship. Pray all day every day; and from time to time use words.

Prayer is *lived* relationship; prayer is being *with* God – aware of God's presence – all day, every day. To maintain the openness of such a relationship, we need to approach prayer with a beginner's mind. When we begin the day, for example, we need to become aware of God's presence; aware that we will live that day – all of it - in God's presence. I understand that this awareness may not be exactly the first thing we recall. I tried an experiment this morning just

to see how close to the beginning of my day I could begin to pray and become aware of God's presence. The short answer is... it wasn't even close to the beginning. The alarm went off and the first thing I did was wonder groggily what day it was; when I realized it was Sunday, I knew I couldn't push the snooze button; so I staggered out of bed and the puppy dog says, oh good, Daddy's up, Daddy's up - lick, lick, snuggle, snuggle – oh Daddy, please rub my belly. Then the kitty cat challenges the puppy to a romp around the bedroom and down the hallway, eventually doubling back to make sure Daddy puts out some fresh food; and the puppy is right behind because she knows that whenever the cat eats she gets a treat... it's only fair; then I rush the puppy downstairs and out the door so she doesn't potty on the carpet; and, finally, I pour a cup of coffee and sit down in my study, ready to begin my day. Only then did I become aware that the day begins, continues, and ends with God. It doesn't have to be the first thing you do, but as your day blooms you need an awareness of God's presence that can take you fruitfully into the day.

A beginner's mind; this image recalls the creation narratives in Genesis; it recalls that first *in the beginning* when God created the heavens and the earth, and God saw that the creation – all of it – was good. We, too, need a beginner's mind to recognize that all things are marked with God's goodness, and that every morning is another *in the beginning*, that every day is like the first day, full of wonder and limitless possibility. As the popular hymn celebrates, *Morning has broken like the first morning*, and the only way we can experience every day in its fullness is to look on the day with God.

I promise you, the world and everything in it looks different when we regard it with God. Nature begins to show its gift like quality. We recognize that everything we have - including our own lives - is a gift from a bountiful, generous God. People look different when we regard them through God's eyes, and our encounters go differently. Instead of reacting to a slight or insult, we find ourselves responding with patience, and a desire to find a way out that benefits all involved.

The world looks different when we regard it with God, and every day can be a unique experience if only we begin with the awareness that God is present to and with us, caressing us

in love and compassion, and yearning for us to step outside our comfort zone and be grace and compassion to others.

A beginner's mind will allow us to see every day as new, fresh, and full of creative possibility; and to see everyone as God's child. The end of the day, however, is also a perfect time for a beginner's mind. It's a perfect time to take inventory of what has happened that day, and ask God for the wisdom and courage to do better the next. It helps to think over the times we felt especially close to God, or when we turned God off and viewed the world through jaded eyes. When did we snap at people, treat them in a reactionary way instead of seeing them as God's child? It's important to examine every day with a beginner's mind because the next morning is also a new beginning. The next day is like the first day, and we can walk into it with a beginner's mind, praying every day all day, and from time to time using words.

Part 3:

### *Prayer's Sacred Center*

Matthew 6.5-8  
(The Message)

August 29, 2010

The words of Christ are clear: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself..." Love must reach over to both sides and draw them together. We cannot love ourselves unless we love others, and we cannot love others unless we love ourselves.

- Thomas Merton, from *No Man Is an Island*

"And when you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat? 6"Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace. 7"The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. 8Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply.

I chose the modern rendering called *The Message* for today's gospel reading, because it powerfully brings to light the problems with the so-called prosperity gospel. There are a lot of snake oil salesmen out there going by the name of pastor, Christian evangelist, or what not; a lot of snake oil salesmen preaching that if we will only invest in God – through their ministry, of course – God will bless us with all the prosperity we can handle. Matthew's Jesus says in so many words not to fall for such snake oil promises, because God is not a vending machine from which we finagle anything and everything we want by depositing a few prayer coins. Effective prayer is something very, very different from this, as we've discovered over the last few weeks.

When we began this series on prayer, we examined the importance of respect; both respect for God and respect for ourselves. When we make outrageous promises to God, for example - Oh, God, just get me out of this mess today and I'll be good the rest of my life - who do we think we're kidding? I mean, do we really think God doesn't know what's going on? Let's show some respect for God, recognizing God's vision for our lives, and not asking for crazy, selfish things that have nothing to do with our spiritual life. Respect is a good place to start today as we seek the sacred center of prayer.

Respect for God and for ourselves is a good place to start, because we show little respect for either when we follow the snake oil pattern and submit a wish list to God and patiently – and passively – wait for God to deliver. If prayer is a lived relationship, and I am convinced it is, we should not assume that ours is a passive role in prayer. God wants us involved in our prayers... and their answers; God wants to partner with us, to use us to answer prayer.

Last week we examined the importance of having a beginner's mind so that we can pray every day, all day, and from time to time use words. That is to say, we can start every day with a keen awareness of God's presence, because with such an attitude we regard the world with God – we share God's perspective – and everything changes. The world overflows with creative possibilities of truth, beauty, and goodness. This, too, seems to move us toward prayer's sacred center.

Today, I suggest that we identify this sacred center, so that our prayer life can be more effective. There are many ways to think of the sacred center of prayer. I propose to discuss three of these very briefly this morning.

Firstly, we need to find that unique place to pray – that center - which Jesus mentions in today's reading. We should find a quiet, secluded place to pray, Jesus says, and our minds race to a secluded forest, a closet, or a dark corner in a public place. But I wonder if this unique place is really a *place* at all. Please allow me to illustrate with a story that references crutches, large guns, and a classic horror movie.

Toward the end of football season my junior year in high school, I suffered a devastating knee injury – tearing cartilage, severing ligaments and the like - that left me on crutches for some time. I decided there was no need to attempt dating during this period; it was just too awkward, me on crutches trying to drive, slowly making my way around the car to open the door for my date (that's right; it wasn't an option. When I grew up, you opened the door for ladies; period, end of story). I decided not to date, that is until I had an opportunity to go out with Sarah Cannon, a girl I had been pining over for some time. Wonder of wonders, I finally had the opportunity to go out with her, so crutches or no crutches, I went with Ms. Cannon to see a movie that was all the rage at the time, *Carrie*. Does anybody remember Carrie? It is quite a thriller! There is one incident in the movie that sheds light on what it means to find that quiet, secluded place to pray. Carrie's mother is a crazed religious maniac, and habitually locks Carry in a prayer closet to insure her purity and sanctity. The result, if you remember, is quite the contrary. Carrie eventually comes unglued herself, her anger and resentment overflowing in acts of wanton violence. Carry was in a quiet, secluded place, but she was certainly not at the sacred center of prayer. We will have to look elsewhere for that center; some place other than a dark closet.

A study of Jesus' words in this passage can give us some sense of his meaning. It seems that he is not really talking about a *place* that is quiet and secluded; he's talking about the innermost recesses of our heart that are intimate and solitary; solitary save for the presence of God with us. This is the first sacred center of prayer, that intimate place in your heart where God alone awaits you. When we're out in the work-a-day world, when we're distracted by

demands, duties, and responsibilities, we have no time for intimacy; in fact, we have no time for much of anything, so we react to things that come our way. But prayer is not about reacting mindlessly. Prayer is about being present with God and discerning God's will and direction for our lives. We can do that only if we enter that quiet place in the depths of our heart.

The first way to think of prayer's sacred center involves you and God alone in the depths of your heart, and the good news is you can take this place with you. You can take this place with you every day, all day and always have with you the possibility of communing with God. When this doesn't happen, we often blame God; we often assume that God is silent. But I don't buy it; I don't believe that God is ever silent. I think too often we simply don't listen; either that or we are too preoccupied and otherwise engaged to attend to God and Spirit.

Even in the quiet, secluded intimacy of your heart, some would say, God can be silent. Again, I don't buy it. God is never silent. In that place, that deep and intimate place, you will find that if nothing else, God is the quiet beneath the silence. God is the quiet beneath the silence, so keep listening and you will hear not the sound of silence but the quiet voice of God, always speaking, always inviting us to respond.

Prayer's sacred center, secondly, has to do with praying in the center of God's will, not our own. I call this the Christmas prayer, and it works just fine for kids. Kids go to the mall, sit on Santa's lap and tell Santa everything they want for Christmas. Oh, Santa! I want this, and this, and this... and on and on. In this example Santa has only one option, either to give them what they want... or not. That's such a clear cut deal that when Jamie was little, I worried about his getting anything for Christmas, because he had never met a Santa Claus that he wasn't afraid of. He absolutely refused to sit on Santa's lap, and I was afraid he was going to wake up on Christmas morning with nothing under the tree.

However this may be, prayer doesn't work like this. We don't – or shouldn't - go to God with demands. We shouldn't simply tell God what we want and wait for God to deliver. Many folk pray this way, and then complain because their prayers are never answered. Why? Because they don't get what they want.

God doesn't answer prayer? Don't be so sure. According to Jesus, God knows better than we what we need, and prayer is about discerning with God what that need might be. If

you think about it, we begin our prayers not knowing what we really need. But in fellowship with God, listening as well as talking, conferring rather than demanding, we can discern God's will, and with God make it a reality in our life. Prayer, you see, is a collaborative affair. Someone has defined prayer as a discussion with God about what we are going to do. God wants to partner with us in prayer, and while that second aspect of prayer's sacred center still involves you and God, it has to do with listening to God's perspective and discerning *with* God the direction for your life.

But there's a third way to think of prayer's sacred center, and it has to do with praying for others as well as ourselves. We often get ourselves tied up in knots trying to figure out whom and what to pray for. Most of us have a sense that we shouldn't pray for ourselves; that would be selfish and immature. What do you think? Is it ok to pray for ourselves or must we always ignore ourselves and pray for our neighbor? The good news is that this is a fabricated problem. We are the ones who have decided that you have to love either yourself or others, pray either for yourself or others; but that's not what Jesus says, and Thomas Merton picks up on that. "The words of Christ are clear," he says. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself..." Love must reach over to both sides and draw them together. We cannot love ourselves unless we love others, and we cannot love others unless we love ourselves."

God always envisions a circle within which everyone is embraced; in which everyone benefits from prayer's power. God wants healing and wholeness for everyone in the situation. Prayer is not a zero sum game in which someone has to lose for another to win. God doesn't work this way. God draws a circle that is large enough for you and your neighbor, and this is prayer's sacred center. Pray in this center and you need not worry about a tension between praying for yourself and praying for others.

It is important to note that this sacred center should include not only family and friends, but as well those with whom we disagree or don't even like. It is only when we begin praying for *all* the others, even the ones we don't like, that we begin to see true community, true unity, true fellowship in our midst. This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer could say that intercessory prayer is the foundation of a faith community.

There are many ways to think of prayer's sacred center. It represents at the very least that intimate place in our heart where we can be alone with God. It represents as well the center of God's will, the God who knows better than we what we need, and who will discern with us the direction for our life. Finally, prayer's sacred center represents a circle drawn large enough to include our neighbor; even the one we don't think too highly of. Edwin Markham celebrates this spacious circle in a short poem entitled *Outwitted*:

He drew a circle that shut me out –  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win  
And we drew a circle that took him in!