

**Listen! Hearing That Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own
Part 5: Prayerful Meditation**

by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Niantic Community Church
March 26, 2023

Scripture: Excerpts from the Gospel of Luke

*5:15 But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. 5:16 **But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray** ... 6:12 Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and **he spent the night in prayer to God** ... 9:18 Once **when Jesus was praying alone**, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" ... 11:1 **He was praying** in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to **pray**, as John taught his disciples" ... 18:1 Then Jesus told them a parable **about their need to pray always** and not to lose heart ... 22:41 Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, **and prayed** ...*

From the above excerpts from Luke's Gospel, it's clear that Jesus devoted quite a lot of time to prayer, or prayerful meditation. That is, the kind of prayer that is not simply talking to God, but listening for God to discern God's will and intention for his path. If someone like Jesus needed to spend so much time discerning God's will, does it not stand to reason that it should be a significant part of our daily lives as well? Or, do we assume that are more attuned to God's will than Jesus was?

In the United States, approximately six in ten people pray daily. Eight in ten pray at least once a week. I'm guessing that most of you pray, but if you are like many people I know, you may feel uncomfortable with prayer, even though you do it.

How long do your prayers generally last? One or two minutes? Three to five minutes? If so, I have bad news and good news for you. The bad news is that those who report the highest degree of satisfaction with their prayer life spend a minimum of 15 minutes each day in prayer. People report even higher satisfaction at 30-45 minutes of daily prayer.

The good news is that, if you don't pray more than a few minutes each day, you are likely to experience far greater satisfaction in your prayer life if you try some of the resources included in this reflection, which are designed for helping a person pray for 15-45 minutes each day.

In her book, *Praying Dangerously*, Regina Sara Ryan offers a prayer that gives voice to the kind of prayer that leads to the most satisfying results – no matter how long you pray each day. I think Jesus would want us to pray this way:

*Deliver us, O God, O Truth, O Love, from quiet prayer
From polite and politically correct language,
From appropriate gesture and form
And whatever else we think we must put forth to invoke or to praise You.*

*Let us instead pray dangerously –
Wantonly, lustily, passionately.
Let us demand with every ounce of our strength,
Let us storm the gates of heaven, let us shake up ourselves
And our plaster saints from the sleep of years.*

*Let us pray dangerously.
Let us throw ourselves from the top of the tower,
Let us risk a descent to the darkest region of the abyss,
Let us put our head into the lion's mouth
And direct our feet to the entrance of the dragon's cave.*

*Let us pray dangerously.
Let us not hold back a little portion,
Dealing out our lives – our precious minutes and our
Energies – like some efficient accountant.
Let us rather pray dangerously – unsafe, profligate, wasteful!*

*Let us ask for nothing less than the Infinite to ravage us.
Let us ask for nothing less than annihilation in the
Fires of Love.*

*Let us not pray in holy half-measures nor walk the middle path
For too long,
But pray madly, foolishly.
Let us be too ecstatic,
Let us be too overwhelmed with sorrow and remorse,
Let us be undone, and dismembered and gladly.*

*Left to our own devices, ah what structures of deceit we have created;
What battlements erected, what labyrinths woven, what traps set for ourselves,
And then fallen into. Enough
Let us pray dangerously – hot prayer, wet prayer, fierce prayer,
Fiery prayer, improper prayer,
Exuberant prayer, drunken and completely unrealistic prayer.*

*Let us say Yes, again and again and again.
And Yes some more.
Let us pray dangerously,
The most dangerous prayer is Yes.*

Note: At this point in worship, we spent the rest of the time experiencing one of these prayer forms first-hand (Four Bows Meditation) You can experience Four Bows Meditation for yourself by going to www.FourBows.org, where I have posted a number of meditation videos.

What follows is a descriptive resource guide for several productive forms of prayerful meditation. These include Sacred Voice Meditation, Four Bows Meditation, Lectio Divina, Walking Meditation, and Labyrinth Meditation. Enjoy!

Sacred Voice Meditation

Outlined below is a basic process I have found helpful for gaining clarity and confidence when faced with difficult decisions. Often, several competing and contradictory voices are swimming around my head, all insisting they know the right way forward. In essence, what I try to do is clear them aside to overhear a conversation between my True Self and the Holy Spirit. One does not need to ascribe to any particular faith tradition – or even believe in the Holy Spirit – for this to be effective. What makes it effective is surrender of preconceived beliefs and notions in order to overhear a conversation you don't have direct control over. There are many variations and additions that could be made to this basic process as one's comfort level with the process deepens. I normally allocate at least 30 minutes.

1. Identify the question that is most pressing for you. I normally take time to pray and ask God if the question that's on my mind is truly the one I most want to ask. I often find that if I prayerfully consider my question over the course of even five or ten minutes, I discover that the question I *truly* want or need to ask is different from the one I started with. Often the difference is only slight – but that difference often “makes all the difference.”

2. Set aside the question and picture yourself inside an impregnable glass sphere where you are perfectly safe from the outside world. You may decide to use a different image than a glass sphere. What it is doesn't matter nearly as much as what you are trying to accomplish through the visualization: Namely, you want to find that part of your consciousness that is truly feeling safe – and truly *is* safe – from outside forces. To find this place, I often picture arrows or rocks bouncing off the glass.

I know I've found the right place when I can feel tension suddenly release and grow still. The best indication that I am where I need to be is that a sense of gladness or joy quietly develops within me. It may not be profound, but it's there. It tends to take me ten minutes or so to find this place and inhabit it most fully.

3. Now is where the real work begins: to take your awareness to the next level of depth and openness to Spirit. What I do is picture a room that I know is completely safe not only

from forces on the *outside*, but from those on the *inside*. It is a room created by God expressly for the purpose of my soul being completely free to raise its voice without fear or worry of any kind. In this room, I have no fear of judgment for whatever my soul says or desires – no judgment from others, from myself, or even from God. Here, I can overhear a voice that is not reacting to anything or anyone, that is free of ego and the need for approval. The voice I overhear in this place is not afraid of anything – even death. It simply is what it is and exists for purposes that are not entirely known to me, yet feel most intimately like they are me. It is the voice of my True Self.

If I have truly found this place inside me, I always experience a sense of deep peace and contentment. Joy is always present as well. I also have a sense of deep surrender. Curiously, I feel completely surrendered to God, even as I know that God has created this place so that I can hear what my soul most deeply wants without worrying about what God may or may not think.

Finding this place sometimes can take anywhere from a few minutes to ten or twenty. (Sometimes I don't find it at all – usually because I haven't allocated enough time for my meditation, or because I'm resisting, or both.) But I always know when I am in it. There is no guesswork.

Once I'm in this place of perfect protection and freedom, I recall the question I entered with and simply pay attention to what my truest Self desires. From that point on, the conversation takes whatever course it needs. It is a conversation between my soul and the Holy Spirit. And it is never boring!

It is also usually right. Though it is not *always* right. So, I have developed a strong discipline of circling back and double-checking my gut in subsequent meditations as well as placing my ideas in conversation with others. My basic rule of thumb is that the riskier the course of action that my soul suggests, the more confirmation it needs before I act on it. I also try to take as small a step forward as possible, so I have repeated chances to ask myself, "Now that I am moving in this direction, does it feel right?" If it repeatedly does, then I set aside my internal and external challenges and move forward confidently and with boldness, promising the Spirit my willingness to change direction if asked, yet also promising my obedience to the direction that I believe the Spirit has revealed.

Four Bows Meditation

The following meditative technique is a variant of the Sacred Voice Meditation that I have found helpful. It is influenced by Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist spiritual practices. The "bows" may be physical or merely internal. The key is to feel in your gut the increasing *surrender* to Spirit. Just remember: The only God you are to surrender yourself to is the One who loves you – and all people – beyond your wildest imagination, without exception. Do NOT use this form of meditation to surrender yourself to any other power.

First Bow (5 min or more)

Physically or imaginatively bow your head slightly, acknowledging that you are in the presence of Spirit. Taking a cue from the Sacred Voice Meditation above, I like to picture myself inside a space that is impregnable to outside energies – especially negative energies.

Once you feel yourself in this protected, sacred space, go over the last 24 hours of your life, giving thanks for everything you can think of that blessed you in some way – especially acts of love, given or received.

Alternatively, this is also a good placed to pray for your “enemies” (as Jesus tells us to do) – i.e., those who are making you uncomfortable right now.

Second Bow (5 min or more):

Imagine yourself bowing deeply at the waist. Then pray for someone who is experiencing physical, emotional, or spiritual distress right now. I advise using the technique we went over last week, where you first pray for an analogous part of yourself. Only after feeling the healing energy flow into you should you direct this energy to the one you intend to pray for. This way you will allow only positive, healing energy to pass through your rather than your own stress or anxiety for the person.

Third Bow (5 min or more):

Imagine yourself in such a deep state of surrender that you are literally on hands and knees before the Divine. You are NOT groveling before any kind of god with “anger management issues.” Rather, you are turning yourself over to a God who loves you more than you love you; who believes in you more than you believe in you; and who loves you and all people beyond your wildest imagination. What guidance would you like to receive from THIS God?

Take time to identify your question or need. Make it specific, and ask it in such a way that God could actually answer you in some way. Best to ask for guidance over “things.” And best to pray “Thy will be done” with respect to either guidance or things. After all, sometimes getting what we ask for can be a curse! (Think of all those myths about Genies offering three wishes ...)

Fourth Bow (5 min or more – preferably a lot more!)

Imagine yourself letting go of all inner control – so deeply that you are now fully prostrate before the Divine. Again, this need not be a physical position but an interior stance of complete and utter surrender. Here, you are so surrendered that you turn over whatever agenda you identified in the Third Bow completely over to God, giving your ascent to God changing your agenda or retaining it. Let your mind wander for the next couple of minutes. If a new agenda appears that is more compelling than the one you were holding, then go with that agenda. But if nothing new appears, take up the agenda you had previously identified and focus your attention on it.

Alternatively, simply “rest in the Presence.” Keep a LOVING GOD front and center in your attention. As you do, follow the thoughts that drift through your mind like watching a movie, but don’t hang on to any of them unless you feel prompted to.

End by giving thanks to a God who always chooses relationship over our perfection. Make note of any decisions you made during your prayer time.

The Process of *Lectio Divina*

Compiled from various sources by Eric Elnes and Elaine Trask

Lectio Divina is a simple, ancient form of prayer and meditation developed first by St. Benedict in the 5th century for use by his monks. *Lectio Divina* cultivates the ability to listen deeply, to hear “with the ear of our hearts” as St. Benedict wrote. The practice soon spread outside the monastery and has been practiced by Christians of one form or another for fifteen hundred years. *Lectio Divina* has been likened to “Feasting on the Word.” The four parts are first taking a bite (*Lectio*), then chewing on it (*Meditatio*). Next is the opportunity to savor the essence of it (*Oratio*). Finally, the Word is digested and made a part of the body (*Contemplatio*).

Lectio Divina has particularly been practiced in the Catholic Church, but in the last several decades it has become increasingly recognized as a helpful spiritual exercise within Protestantism. This form of meditation has been particularly popular among young adults.

The practice involves reading a passage of scripture or other text four times, each time engaging with the passage differently. The object is to allow God's Spirit to touch you by turning your soul at different “angles” where God might find an opening to get inside and stir your inner waters.

(1) *Lectio* (reading/listening): This first moment consists in reading the scriptural passage slowly, attentively, up to several times if necessary. The idea is to find a word or two, or a phrase, that sticks in one's mind - for whatever reason. Many write down these words.

(2) *Meditation* (meditation): *Meditatio* involves ruminating on the passage or one of its words/phrases. The image of the ruminant animal quietly chewing her cud was used in antiquity as a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God.

Roll the passage, word, or phrase round in your mind. Free associate with it - let images, feelings, memories and other words, arise. Don't worry if your thoughts or feelings seem “irreverent.” The key is to engage authentically, trusting that being authentic is more important than being pious.

(3) *Oratio* (Prayer): *Oratio* is understood both as dialogue with God. This is a time for prayer focused both on the passage and on one's personal life. Many people take the word/phrase upon which they have been ruminating and hold it next to a life experience or question they are exploring or struggling with, allowing that word/phrase to have a conversation with that experience/question. Some will also recite the word/phrase as they contemplate or prayer. They may close with "free" prayer - praying about anything that's on their mind, whether it connects with the passage or not.

(4) *Contemplatio* (contemplation): This is a time for simply enjoying God's presence without particular words or thoughts, strategies or questions. It is also time for making decisions about what to do with any insights received in the previous stages. Are there any next steps that are indicated? This is also a time for offering thanks and gratitude to God.

A Guide to Walking Meditation

One of my favorite forms of Walking Meditation is to use the Four Bows Meditation approach while walking through a forest or other setting where I will not be overly distracted.

Another form I enjoy is one where I prayerfully discern a question that I could use some help with, then go out for a walk being especially aware of the things that catch my attention. By "catch my attention," I don't simply mean that they strike me as interesting or pretty. They stand out because something in my gut says, "Oh!" When I get that sensation, I start to contemplate the object or scene in relation one of three basic themes depending upon the order I encounter the object/scene:

(a) **Situation:** How does this object/scene help me better understand or frame my present situation with respect to the question I've asked?

(b) **Challenge:** What does this object/scene tell me about the challenge(s) I presently face with respect to my question?

(c) **Way Forward:** What does this object/scene tell me about moving forward with respect to my question?

When I find my first object, I contemplate how it speaks to (a) above. I continue to contemplate this until I come upon the second object/scene that penetrates my awareness more deeply than others. This could be a minute later or 20 minutes later. One never knows. Once I find it, I move on to (b) above, and so it goes ...

Sometimes I encounter "false starts." That is, an object or scene grabs my attention, but when I start scratching around for connections to my situation, I simply come up with a bunch of nothing. Rather than hang on too tightly to something that's unhelpful, I mentally "let go" of that object/scene and look for others.

I find this practice helpful because lots of things in nature catch my attention but a much more limited number trigger seem “significant” in terms of how they may speak to me. Sometimes an object seems “significant” but it just plain isn’t. This may, of course, be because of my limited awareness and not because the object isn’t potentially “significant.” It doesn’t matter. I’m not looking for “magical” objects or objects that “God put in my path.” I’m simply opening myself up to the way that Spirit may speak to me through my encounters with the world. I trust that my subconscious awareness (which tends to be more open to the Spirit because it has less guards up) is far quicker at processing what’s before me than my conscious mind.

If an object grabs my attention while I’m intentionally trying to be open to the Spirit, I figure there’s a good chance that my subconscious has been in “conversation” with that object or scene well before I have been aware of it! But if I’m not “getting it” with respect to a particular object after several minutes of contemplating it, I simply move on. I’ve practiced these Pneuma Walks long enough that I’ve got a pretty good bead on the kind of “Oh!” feeling I get when there’s productive object/scene in front of me, but I still find a “dud” now and again.

Guidelines for Meditating in a Labyrinth

There are many ways to walk through a labyrinth. This is one of them:

- 1) Stand in front of the entrance to the labyrinth.** State your intention as clearly as possible. For example: *I want a solution to my problem with ...* It could be anything that is troubling you.
- 2) Center yourself by taking a couple of deep breaths.** This is important because doing this you instruct your subconscious and all other parts of yourself to pay attention to your sincere wish of solving your problem.
- 3) Acknowledge your coming meditative or spiritual journey within the labyrinth.** Say a short prayer. Closing your eyes and reflecting or taking a simple bow are other nice ways to begin the process.
- 4) Begin your walk.** The first step sets the pace for your walk. It can be fast or slow. Choose your intention for the walk. Are you being spiritual, reflective, mindful, playful, creative or something else? If you're problem solving, your walk becomes a meditation when you surrender all your problems and just walk. Other parts of you have now a chance to process your request of a solution.
- 5) Continue to walk.** Keep your mind quiet, and still pestering thoughts each time they arise. Concentrate on the placement of one foot before the other and rhythmic, gentle and regular breathing.

If you're problem solving, walk as you don't have any problems at all. Let it all go. Surrender to the activity of attentive walking. Let the burden (your problem) fall off your shoulders. Various parts of your being are now processing your wish for solution. All you have to do is to let it incubate and not interfere, let it be and let go of any expectations. Continue to walk as you didn't have any problems at all. Let it all go.

6) Pause on reaching the center. You may stop here for a while, sit or lay down if you feel like it and meditate or reflect. The main thing is to let yourself surrender totally to your inner process. It feels so good to have all the time you need.

7) Walk out. When you are ready, just walk out. Accept the insights and gifts you may have received. Are you feeling directed to any particular action? If so, what changes will you need to make going forward that will allow you the best chance of sticking with the course of action you feel called to take? Adopting a sense of gratitude will always facilitate resolutions. Offer your thanks for what you have learned.