

The subject: Prayer

I think we are turning into great pray-ers. Maybe that is sort of a secret — “Psst. Want to pray?” Or maybe like an AA thing, “My name is Rod and I pray.” It is an uncool thing for some of us — if we suggest praying we can’t maintain our tacit agreement to only be against things and never risk being passionately for something. Whatever...we are learning to do it.

All through the season of Lent the folks in Center City tried to think about it. Some people probably stopped coming to the public meeting until it was all over, so they would not be confronted with the speaker begging them to try out another new aspect of prayer. But many more people did more than just try things out. They did it. They got together on Tuesdays. Cells deepened their prayer together. People kept talking about, “What it means for me pray” again and again. It was almost like we had been laboring under some resistance and we needed to talk it out with each and with God. Probably so.

This issue of the *Dialogue* has many new voices summing some things up, giving testimony to what God has been doing, and generally trying to keep prayer stirred up among us. It is not like it happens by itself. So let’s stir together.

This would be a great issue to which to respond. Send us your prayer stories or reactions to the articles written. We will print them, with your name, in the next issue. Sorry, we generally do not print anonymous things. Someone sent us an unsigned article this quarter and we did not keep it.

Editor — Rod White

“God Answered My Prayer” Stories

So often, a direct cause of skepticism about God and prayer stems from this puzzle, “I asked God for something and he did not give it to me.” Or “I prayed and nothing happened.” Does God “answer” or “respond” to what we are saying to him when we pray? If you listen to the following story tellers, you can probably tell that different people see it different ways, but the answer is definitely, “Yes.”

The Cell Leader Coordinators asked the Cell Leaders to share a story about a time they remember that God answered their prayer. Here is what they heard. The stories are anonymous because they may not have been written down accurately and this isn’t about history, just encouragement.

1) One person was in the middle of an important project at work and it was going bad. He made mistakes and got upset. He was basically out of control and giving into all his worst instincts. He stopped to pray and asked God to “capture him” and stop him. God did stop him. He felt able to leave the project alone for a while, to let go. He asked God to soothe the overwhelming feeling he had been experiencing, and that happened.

2) One of the cell members was about to go to the doctor for a biopsy. The cell prayed about her serious organ disease, asking God to heal her. When the doctors made their tests, they could not find the growth anymore. The cell considered this God’s work on their behalf.

3) One couple prayed about finding the right house for their family when they moved to Philly. The move was hard and entering into the city felt bad. They also got hooked up with an unscrupulous landlord who made things feel even worse. So they prayed. A song on the radio lead them to say, “What God Has for Me, It Is For Me.” A house in just the right neighborhood

came up for sale. They did “drive-by” praying. The sellers came to a good price. The family felt instantly at home and have been happy there ever since.

4) One cell took a dive in number of people and in morale, just as this storyteller took the leadership. They prayed about it and left it to God. Now six of them are covenanted and committed. It feels like a healthy cell ready to explore new ways to pray and to be porous.

5) Recently, a couple was trying to buy a certain house that they liked and which was in their pre-approved price range. They had been praying through the process all along and felt excited about the move. Since they were novice and nervous first-time buyers, they had been sure to pray that the “door would slam shut” if the purchase was a bad idea. Then they had one last inspection by an expert and he discovered all sorts of work that had to be done — tens of thousands of dollars worth. They felt God saved them.

6) Finding out about Circle of Hope was an answer to prayer for one person. When he lived in another state he had two sets of people he knew. There were the church people who he couldn't connect to personally even though they were very nice and all; and then there were his work friends, who were into books and art and did interesting things, but with whom there was no connection, spiritually. He had wished to God that the two spheres could somehow be united. He wanted to be a part of a group of people who were interesting people who were also Christian. When he moved to Philly there was Circle of Hope and he considered that an answer to prayer.

7) There was a night when one of our friends was out with her roommate. Her roommate dropped her car key, and they couldn't find it in the pitch black night on the street in West Oak Lane. She needed her key to drive the car. They started to pray and to sing the song: “Peace is mine! I told Satan to ‘Get thee behind.’ Then they found the key. It is obviously a small thing, but it was a big issue to them, then. Both their lives had been extremely stressful and this little addition to that stress had the potential of being “the straw that broke the camel's back.” They praised God for removing the straw.

8) One of our friends felt resistant to thinking about how God “answered a prayer:” God *always* answers prayer. Little ways he answers seem like a blip, since they are so expected.

That being said, here are two events that stick out in her mind. Her brother was in intensive care, on machines, for four days after an accident. The church and all sorts of people took over the hospital chapel and prayed over him. There was a chance that he could have recovered from the brain swelling. At one point, the immediate family prayed and they all knew they had to take him off life support. He died.

Eight years later our friend's mother had a brain aneurysm burst at work. The right side of her face clamped down and she fell off her chair. Strangely enough, the broken place closed itself back up. While she was having a test to see what was wrong, her mother had a seizure from a bad reaction to the dye they had injected into her. During that time of semi-consciousness, she had a vision of Jesus holding a lamb with her name on it (This was not a typical experience for her stoic mom). People all over the world were praying for her to recover. When she did, there was a real sense that God had spared her life.

So what does one do with such seemingly contradictory answers? What our friend does is remember that in both situations she deeply experienced the mercy of God. She was comforted in the first instance with her brother. She was shown mercy in the second instance with her mother. God is the Lord. She now sees life as transient. This time in which we live and our health are not everything. She assumes that God is responding and it is all good.

9) One of our friends wrote her story out for us this way: “At one point in my life I was very far from God. My heart was always his, but my body and mind wanted to forget it. I left home to travel aimlessly until one rainy, lonely day it was clear where I should be headed: a completely foreign place, where I was bound for solitude and silence. I went, knowing that I couldn't do it myself. “God, I can't go alone,” I prayed. “Carry me where you want me to go. Let me be yours.” He took me safely to my destination, got me a job, a home, friends and family. He renewed my

dependence on him. Two years later I left that place a new woman with her body, mind and heart all focused on her Lord.

Ash Wednesday, 3a.m.

From the second floor window, I could see the undulation of the crowd. Mardi Gras on South Street. When they sensed or saw a transaction beginning between a boy and a girl, they packed in tightly, forming an insistent circle where a moment ago there were only individuals milling.

One girl, holding her two companions in a hand-to-hand chain, weaved her way through the holes, beckoning, gyrating, teasing and then slipping again through the spaces. Boys in packs, some with signs, others shouting aloud, others with silent question mark eyes saying, "Show your tits!"

Young, drunk, they didn't know what they were doing. How little thought, how little intention, how much the pull of the crowd pushed them places they never meant to go. From the second floor window, it was transparently easy to see.

Who were the girls with garlands of beads—what drove them to trade for such trinkets? Whose sons were the boys who were jumping on vehicles, throwing punches, carrying stolen TVs? To what end? But even with a heavy heart, I did not pull back from the window, or keep my head from turning to see what was drawing the edge of the crowd together into knots of confusion.

Now the mayor considers curfews for 2002. The shop windows will be taped up for weeks. Do we believe we can fill our empty places with beads and bravado? Do we hope that the midst of a crowd is reason enough?

"And I pray that you...may have power...to grasp how wide and how long and high and deep is the love of Christ..." Ephesians 3:17-18

Liz Einsig

Looking Beyond Ourselves

God has been clearly speaking to me about prayer over the last several years. For the longest time I held a simplified concept of prayer. There was God and there was me. Prayer was the direct connection between God and me. I was aware that others prayed but never really thought about prayer in the corporate sense.

It's no hidden agenda that Circle of Hope puts a lot of emphasis on community. Having been involved with Circle for several years now, that emphasis of community has affected my concept of prayer. I no longer think of prayer just as a dialogue between God and me but as a conversation with Him, my cell, our network of cells, our network of congregations, the Brethren in Christ Network and the worldwide church. I realized prayer has more power once I recognized the fact that I wasn't in the middle of the deep woods praying alone. From where I sit praying in the middle of the woods I may not be able to see anyone else because the woods are so dense. However, only 25 yards away there is another individual sitting praying. The woods are indeed filled with people praying all the time. They are sitting alone. They are gathered in groups. And, at different times in my life I can sometimes see those people — and sometimes I can't. However, I now know that they are there. The community of Christ is beyond all that we can comprehend.

I think Circle can become more of a light for God if we realize that we are a part of the greater Christ community. We need to continue in prayer but the prayers of Circle members alone will not lead us to where God wants us. We are not the only ones praying for Christ's redemption in the city. There are others. Some even pray for us. Some we pray for. And there are others who we do not know, now and in the future, who join us in prayer. Prayer is the web that ties the community of Christ together. Prayer is powerful once we look beyond ourselves.

Trevor Day

The Way of the Heart Book Review

Wading in the cultural ocean of our dear city, riding a crest of informational deluge, wave upon wave of chaotic capitalism crushes and tumbles us face first into the shifting sands of a relativistic beach. We crawl to our feet, scraped, dizzy and embarrassed as our bathing suits of innocence slowly float out to sea.

Pointing out the drowning effect of our chaotic modern society is so cliché and yet so central to our daily frustrations. We all bitch about it. Particularly late at night or early in the morning or wherever and whenever you seek refuge to pray in the quiet of mind, body, soul. “ Aaaahhhh! Get out of my head stupid pop song, late PGW bill, and unchecked day planner check lists!”

Our prayer, our very conversation with God seems to be what suffers most of all from our busy culture and busy lives. I think many of us at the core are frustrated trying to figure out how to pray with a quiet heart. It is because of this common struggle that I think The Way Of The Heart, by Henri Nouwen, needs to be read by many of us. Not that a book is well suited to reaching the heart or the feet of a person. In fact, often it goes in the mind and stays there in a corner like a packrat's old clothes. More clutter. But The Way of the Heart is pretty good at avoiding that tendency in literature; employing simple, conversational language that makes Nouwen's intellectual insight accessible and motivating.

The action to which Nouwen tries to navigate his reader is the kind of ceaseless prayer of the heart that ultimately transforms the whole of a soul until it aligns with Christ.

The book's greatest contribution is its translation of deeply mystical ancient Christian teachings into extremely practical insights on how to mature in your faith while in the clutches of modern life.

The Way of the Heart draws most of its wisdom from the “desert fathers and mothers” of the 2nd to 4th centuries. Folks like Anthony, Sarah, Theodora, and Agathon were used by the Holy Spirit to shape much of what Christianity was and continues to be today. They played crucial roles in the decision making of what books to include in the Bible, and in what statements to make in the Nicene Creed. So whether you like it or not the Desert Fathers have influenced our modern day faith immeasurably.

Unfortunately, one of their most important teachings has failed to consistently work its way into the modern Christian's relationship with Christ. That is the teaching of interior prayer, or “prayer of the heart”. Henri Nouwen has rediscovered their wisdom on this topic and explained it in a way we can readily apply. In this day of the busied mind and cluttered heart, it is wisdom desperately needed. The Way of the Heart offers a simple path to “flee from the world, be silent, and pray always” (p.91). It is a path that can calm the stormy seas and bring our hearts to rest in Christ...standing next to Him as His bride adorned in a shiny new bathing suit! It's good stuff...and its important.

Scott Krueger

Let Us Pray

The Anglican/Episcopal Call to Prayer

The disciples wanted to know how to pray aright. Their desire was to seek God's mind . This desire is often followed by the willingness to be transformed by the mind of God. Unlike the self-righteousness of the Pharisees or the empty words in a liturgy, the disciples knew that Jesus talked with His father early every morning and several time during the day. They had seen how the quiet seeking was perfected in Jesus. They knew that HE never wasted any time but was always doing the business of His father.

Jesus died for us and rose up again. He has therefore given us access into God's presence, along with making us heirs of God's promise. He even calls us His friends. He encourages us to pray and He has given us a model prayer. Jesus says we should ask for anything in His name. He chides us for not having because we do not ask rightly. He is sufficient and has given us enough grace to follow Him. “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

Whether in worship or at a prayer meeting or in our closets we are always to seek to see God's face.

Sometimes we will feel disconnected with the throne room of grace and there are times of sadness and confusion. There are times of feeling lost and those times when we will feel like giving up. At those times we will feel the urge to recklessness as though we have nothing to lose. May I urge us evermore to pray. We would like some clear direction for our lives and we would like answers to the questions that we sometimes will have, so let us pray.

I pray even now, that the desire to always want to know that Jesus is around us is nurtured/birthing in us and that desire will overwhelm us. He wants to and is waiting to hear from us so let us pray. Sometimes the answers to our prayers are immediate and sometimes our prayer requests are never realised. I know that what happens when we pray is not always for us to know. As we continue to walk with God I know that He will continue to show us more of ourselves. I know that there will be many, and I look forward to the many discussions we will have with Him.

Prayer is also self-gratifying as it allows us to vent to our maker/lover and we can be sure that He is quite capable of and is going to do something about our request. He is, after all, the Alpha and Omega and can shake all of Heaven and Earth. Even as this article is ended let us pray.

Our father who art in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come to us
and be realised in us,
evermore show us the father.
Lead us in truth.
Amen

Farrell Lawrence

A Few Books on Prayer

The Struggle of Prayer

Donald Bloesch

(how to hold on to God's outstretched hand)

The Breath of Life

The Hunger of the Heart

Alone with God

Ron DelBene

(practical help for growing deep from the Upper Room)

The Sacrament of the Present Moment

Jean-Pierre de Caussade

(practical work with an old spiritual master)

The Celtic Way of Prayer

Esther De Waal

(in depth look at the character and practices of pre-Romanized church in the British Isles)

Living the Presence

Tilden Edwards

(spiritual discipline work with one of the Shalem Institute directors)

The Meaning of Prayer

Harry Emerson Fosdick

(Classic exploration from a mainline church hero)

The Celebration of Discipline

Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home

Richard Foster

(recent classics for everybody)

A Testament of Devotion

Thomas Kelly

(Quaker devotional classic)
The Other Side of Silence
Morton Kelsy
(a guide to meditation)
The Practice of the Presence of God
Brother Lawrence
(how to pray all day)
Clowning in Rome
The Way of the Heart
Henri Nouwen
(lessons in solitude and prayer)
Praying with Francis of Assisi
J. Stoutsenberger
(devotional guide using the example of Francis)

Get thee to Amazon!

Have your own favorites to share? E-mail them to [rod @ circleofhope.net](mailto:rod@circleofhope.net)