

Speak
“Stay connected.”
Matthew 7:7-11

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Say Your Prayers

I'd slipped into patterns of life and work. Life as a pastor with a spouse and a baby could be just as fast-paced in a small town as anywhere. Never enough minutes in the day.

Ever have that happen to you?

On a particular Friday I took my day off: an island of rest. I slept in, moseyed through breakfast and finally took a long, leisurely shower when I started to think about my schedule and a commitment I made to be in Kalamazoo – 35 miles away – for a meeting at 12:30.

Sudden panic.

In the next instant a trail of water could be seen leading from the shower through the hallway and into the living room where Laura, eyes as big as saucers, stared at me wrapped in a towel and dripping wet. “Laura!” I said, “I have to be in Kalamazoo in 15 minutes!”

Then I remembered the meeting wasn't that day. “Never mind,” I said. “It's next week.” And I calmly went back to my shower.

I sort of forgot about it; but Laura did not. Later that day she looked at me across the table, took my hand in hers and said, “John: I'm worried. You've become too responsible for everything and you have to get away from work and family and everything.” She made me promise.

I think she was aware of something I yet wasn't. My quest to cover all the bases was setting me up for a kind of spiritual deficiency. Trying to do everything, I left nothing for God to accomplish.

I'd forgotten to make time to spend with God: rest in God; draw in the Spirit of Peace like you'd drink in a long breath of cool air.

Intending to serve God, I was defeating my purpose.

It wasn't a matter of my failing to pray. Prayers were said. Lots of them, usually. It's more like I was losing a *prayer life*.

Jesus' Prayer

Often, you hear very spiritual people say they're spiritually deficient.

Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic Trappist, is considered one of the great spiritual masters of the 20th Century. I once heard that he said he was only a baby when it came to meditation and spiritual maturity.

Our Tuesday morning group read a book by Barbara Brown Taylor, professor of spirituality and author of books that delight readers with spiritual insight. Even she says "I am a failure at prayer."¹

Every one of us needs to have a life that goes beyond *saying* prayers to having an ever-enriching, on-going communion with God.

We need help. The Lord's Prayer, the prayer we say more than any other, was the centerpiece of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. About everything he said about living life, relating to each other and God, and even how to pray revolves around that prayer.² He said,

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

Ask; seek, knock: at first blush it sounds like the spiritual life is all about work: plead persistently so you're sure to eventually get what you want. It sounds like that 'til you consider what these instructions meant to the people Jesus was talking to.

Asking, searching, knocking on the doors of mercy were all references ancient Jews used for prayer. Not three different things you need to do or three stages of prayer: they all just mean: *pray*.³

Pray so that your praying is more than listing your demands. God is not a candy machine; prayer is not the six quarters you insert, with the delivery of your requested outcome the candy that comes out.

Prayer makes you open to ask, search, and knock on the doors of God's mercy – making you dependent and expectant for the One who will give beyond your wisdom or your understanding.

The fish in Palestine looked like eels; their bread looked like flat stones that were everywhere. A cruel trick: if a child asked for food and a parent, instead, gave them a snake and a stone. Jesus said: "you'd give your kids the best; don't you think God would do even better?"

So trust God.

God is already everywhere and in your every moment: *so simply show up, yourself.* Be with God. Pray. That's what it's about.

Two weeks after Laura got after me I loaded the car with extra clothes, a lunch, and Kasha the dog, then took off to a state park on the shores of Lake Michigan: not too far, and yet a world away. The snow was deep, but the air was warm: it would be good for walking.

Kasha and I spent the whole day climbing sand dunes, running the beach, and hiking the trails. I'd throw snow balls and watch her race after them, never able to dig them out of the deep snow. The freshness of the breeze off the lake...just...filled...us.

It was heavenly.

It wasn't until later in the day that I realized: all the while I had been at prayer. Sometimes there were words, sometimes it was silence like when you're with a good friend and neither of you say anything, yet in the silence you've said everything.

I'd shown up.

Trappists teach a way of praying that's called the centering prayer.⁴ It's simple. You go to the most comfortable place you can and start repeating your favorite name for God. Open your mind and just be there, receptive. If another thought comes to mind – don't fight it like it's a distraction – just give it to God. If you fall asleep, don't scold

yourself: be thankful you *slept in the Lord*. Don't evaluate it, saying it was a good or poor session. Just be there.

Like that. No matter how you pray: ask, seek, knock – allow yourself to be dependent and open. Give yourself a chance to listen.

In the end, it's not that some of us are spiritual babies or failures at prayer. We are just God's children. God just wants you to show up.

Live Your Prayer

"...We renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers..." a church membership promise. It's like I was saying last July.

When God calls you: say, "Here I am."

Day's end, I stood on ice flows pushed by the waves into piles of frozen water on the shore, looking out to the horizon, watching little icebergs bobbing on the darkness of the water. Shafts of light draped through the clouds. A flock of birds flew in one direction then, suddenly, turned. I drew in the freshness of the air and said out loud as I breathed it out: "Lord, this is Sabbath. And I need Sabbath. But I don't get much chance to have Sabbath."

The answer came with a strong knowing in my heart. I could sense the voice: "John, there is no freedom without discipline."

All the Lord was asking me to do was accept every moment as communion with God. Then, from time to time *have time* like I just had – even a few minutes or an hour and sometimes much more.

So I would learn how to always listen. Show up. Keep showing up.

This membership promise is a gift, you know.

It just means, "I promise...to breathe in."

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*. New York, New York: Harper One. © 2009. p 176.

² M. Eugene Boring. "The Gospel of Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* vol. VIII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. p 212

³ *Ibid*

⁴ **M. Basil Pennington**, *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday. © 1980 [ISBN 0385145624](https://www.doubleday.com/books/9780385145624).