“God already knows what’s on my heart, why do I need to do my own prayers?”

“We have a whole book full of prayers and we use it every Sunday; of course I pray.”

“No one has ever taught me to pray for myself and I know I’m missing out on something.”

Perhaps one or more of these statements, all of which I have heard, resonate with you. They have made me wonder why it is that there are so many different understandings of prayer.

So let’s face it, the Bible and BCP give us some conflicting messages about prayer, or at least they seem to. Take for instance the first formal prayer we do almost every Sunday. The one which comes right after the opening hymn. It’s called the Collect for Purity, and it addresses God and says “to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid.” Right there, doesn’t that say we don’t need to tell God anything, because God already knows it all? Yes, it does say that, but there’s something missing if we stop there. To assume that because God knows you better than you know yourself, is not the same as being connected to God in a way which enriches our lives. Stopping at the point of believing that God knows your heart is like leaving a message on someone’s answering machine that says “help, I’m in trouble, I need you,” and then not saying where you are or how to reach you. What is God supposed to do with that kind of message if you haven’t left a callback number? The truth is, God can do wonders with that kind of message, if you’re on God’s contact list and can be reached. That’s why we need to learn to pray. To open that line of communication with God which works in both directions. How else are we to appreciate the tremendous love and mercy and grace which is flowing into our lives every moment of every day, even when we’re miserable and can only trust that it’s there?

Then there’s the argument that we have a whole book full of prayers so when I want to pray I can find something in the Prayer Book. But honestly, total reliance on “pre-assembled prayers” is a real hazard for those of us from a liturgical tradition. The BCP is full of beautiful, eloquent, powerful prayers. Praying the Daily Office from the Prayer Book is an incredibly valuable spiritual practice and it’s one I hope you will all consider. The prayers and Psalms of Morning and Evening Prayer are so very effective in bringing our scattered minds into focus on God. But relying just on these “dressy prayers” or the other daily devotional tools we may use has two hazards. First, they do not push us to learn to pray spontaneously, and second, they don’t challenge us to be transparent before God. The second one is what’s most important, that we learn to come before God in a state of transparency, of humility, of surrender to God. That’s what opens the communication and establishes our connection with God. Think about how you talk to your closest friend and compare that to how you talk to the friendly checker at City Market. Then think about what you receive back from your relationship with your closest friend vs from that relationship across the checkout stand. We don’t have to cultivate a personal relationship with God through prayer, God will still pour out unbounded love to us. But unless we have cultivated a close personal relationship with the Almighty, we miss out on experiencing what God is offering us in return.

Let me step back here just a bit and clarify my language. I consistently refer to prayer as communication with God. But if the name “God” is too mysterious and lacking in form for you, if you need a more concrete focus for your prayers, Jesus is your guy. Many people ask if it’s okay to pray to Jesus. Scripture identifies Christ as our Great High Priest. And priests are those who act as intermediators between the people and God. In the BCP we identify Jesus as “our only mediator and advocate.” I often conclude prayers with “in Jesus’ name.” What I’m saying when I do that is that I am coming not in my own name, not on my own merit, not in my own worth. I am praying through Christ because Christ loved me. Christ died for me. Christ rose for me. Christ intercedes for me. That is what that little phrase carries. So yes, if praying to Jesus works for you, do it.

Learning to pray isn’t hard, it’s just a matter of desire and commitment. Many of us get very hung up on using the right words and making our prayers sound “worthy of God.” I think that the beautiful language of our Prayer Book has something to do with that problem. Our corporate prayers are wonderful! They are eloquent and “godly” and reverent and polished and often have the power to bring me to tears when I surrender to them. But those prayers also make me think that when I pray on my own, or for others, my words need to be just as eloquent and godly and polished, as if I needed to do it just right in order to woo God into my life. But God is already here, already in our lives, and is constantly trying to woo us into completing the connection so we can have a two way conversation. Our prayers do not need to be anything more than open and honest. And if that means shaking your fist in anger and frustration or falling to your knees in gratitude, it’s all good. If we come before the divine in humility and surrender, as our most vulnerable selves, we give God a space to work with. And that’s all God is asking us to do, give the Holy One something to work with. Your words don’t matter, where you go to pray doesn’t matter, the time of day doesn’t matter. It’s your intention and willingness not just to ask, but also to listen. That’s what God wants.

Establishing a prayer life can take many forms. There are multitudes of self help and devotional books written about it and some can be very helpful. Or pick up the BCP and turn to page 136, “Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families.” It’s an easy place to start, can be shortened to accommodate a busy schedule and will still get you in the habit of daily prayer. **But,** don’t glide by the line that says “Prayers may be offered for ourselves and others.” Take that time for a conversation with God, or Jesus, or whatever name works for you to recognize the “really real,” the “true good,” the divine power of the universe.

In my life there have been times when I just felt out of sync with God. Something had happened or a whole series of things had piled up or I just felt like I was living in a spiritual wasteland. There is a practice that I have gone back to time and again to get over those dry spells, and perhaps you will find it helpful. I learned this from best selling author Melody Beattie,[[1]](#footnote-2) who writes about co-dependency, and then adapted it a bit. It works like this. Every day, preferably early in the morning before your day gets bombarded with outside distractions and business, sit down and list 8 - 10 things that fill in this blank. “I am grateful that…” Notice, you are not listing things you are grateful “for.” Sometimes that’s too easy and sometimes it’s too hard. There have been days when my list included things like,”I am grateful that I feel restless and unsettled in my job.” “I am grateful that I worry about X even though it’s none of my business.” “I am grateful that the library has great audio books.” Your list may have something like “I’m grateful that I had to fight with the kids to get them to school on time, but we made it.” or “I’m grateful that I know I am frustrated with X and want to punch something.” There were some days, when I was first starting this practice that my first entry was “I am grateful that I am still doing this practice even though I think it’s really stupid.”

I know it seems like a strange exercise, to focus on saying thanks for both the good and the difficult in your life. But over time, this exercise will connect you with gratitude for what you have and what you are, instead of what you want or wish you were. God wants us to come as we really are and this can help us face that, bring it before God in an attitude of possibility, and when we do that, amazing things really can happen.

44A meaningful and transformative prayer life takes practice and patience and trust. The words will come, if words are needed, but it’s all pretty simple. Anne Lamott[[2]](#footnote-3) says that it all boils down to three kinds of prayers, “help,” “thanks,” and “wow.” “Help,” here’s what I need. “Thanks,” gratitude from the heart. And “wow,” when we are stunned to a place beyond words. If you find yourself at a loss for how to pray, perhaps those three words will help you get started. Then just let go of your inhibitions and let the conversation flow. You will be amazed at what this new best friend comes up with in return.

God is constantly inviting us into relationship. And we can choose to invest in it, or not. God will still love us in a way that is better than the best love you have ever experienced. But for us to experience that love we have to want to listen. And that’s why we’ve spent the last four Sundays talking about spiritual practices. So we can be tuned in to God’s love for us, and so we can take advantage of the wisdom of the universe, and so we have somewhere to go when we are overflowing with joy, or with sorrow. God’s loving arms are waiting to embrace us, and the words are just these. “Come here child, come talk to me.”

We don’t have to cultivate a personal relationship with God through prayer, God will still pour out his love to us. But unless we have cultivated a close personal relationship with God, we miss out on experiencing what God has to offer us in return.

1. Beattie, Melody. “Make Miracles in 40 Days: Turn What You Have Into What You Want,” Simon & Schuster, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Lamott, Anne. “Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers.” Riverhead Books, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)