

On Centering Prayer

Selinde Krayenhoff

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires, known, and from you no secrets are hidden. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Amen, indeed. So be it. But how?

How can I open myself to this power promised us? How can I open my heart so it be changed? How do I get out of my head and my need to control my life and allow the power of God to speak through me and magnify God's holy name?

These are questions I've been asking ever since I was baptized some 13 years ago. I came into the church out of a longing to journey with others and to have a common language to attempt to express the inexpressible. I love the liturgy that points to that which is beyond description. And I've had a lot of questions and concerns, especially around the "how-to's" of developing a spiritual life.

When I asked people, "Tell me about prayer. How do you do it?" I was told to go into my room and spend time alone with God. Unfortunately, I mostly found myself alone with myself. And I was getting tired of that. Getting tired of *my* ideas of God, of *my* desires, of *my* incessant, mostly circular thinking. I was looking for a way of connecting with that which was much bigger than myself, the "My thoughts are not your thoughts."

Two years ago, I went to a talk by Rev. Christopher Page entitled simply *Prayer*. I learned how prayer could be more about listening than talking. My ears perked up. Immediately I could see a way out of my circular, judgmental self-talk. A way out of my head into my heart. I signed up to take a full day workshop on Centering Prayer with Christopher and his wife, Heather.

I have been praying daily using Centering Prayer ever since. I have not looked back. Why?

In our doxology we say, "Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." In Centering Prayer we sit simply with our intention to open to God's will. I start my prayer time by saying, "Jesus, I consent to your presence and action in my life." And I leave it at that. No requests, or appeals. And then I rest in the assurance that a power greater than I will lead me where I need to be. I sit quietly for the 20 minute prayer period practicing the gesture of letting go. I let go of thoughts that hook my attention. In those 20 minutes every day I am practicing the kind of life Jesus led - of letting go and letting God. The key is not to judge myself, my prayer time, my relationship. I simply let go of any thoughts and gently return to my intention

through the use of a key word or phrase. This is a nonviolent form of prayer. No judgment, no reprimands, no shame.

Fr. Thomas Keating, the priest who brought Centering Prayer out of the ancient Christian tradition into this modern age posed the ultimate question at VST this summer in a course that both he and Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault taught called *Conversations of the Heart*: “Are we going to live life on our terms, or on God’s terms?” Our first choice leaves us out of relationship with our Creator; the second, opens us up to being transformed in ways we could never ask or imagine.

Fr. Keating once said, “The only bad prayer time is the one you don’t show up for.” This was enormously helpful for me in the beginning because I could get myself into a knot, judging myself for the hundreds of times each prayer time I would get caught up with a ‘great idea’ or churned up with emotion imagining or remembering events. I worked so hard to be good at Centering Prayer. Fr. Keating says, “In the beginning effort is important. Because that’s how we learn that effort doesn’t work!” We learn that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are just that... gifts. All we need to be is open. And Centering Prayer helps us in the practice of being open. The fruits of the prayer are seen in our daily lives. With some months of Centering Prayer behind me now I can see these fruits in my own life. Less and less I presume to know what gifts should look like. I’m learning to see that “difficult” isn’t necessarily bad or wrong. I find myself letting go of my preconceived ideas and judgments. I can actually see the moments of choice more clearly in my life. In the single moment of a breath, I find myself remembering I have the choice to let go. And all of a sudden my anger evaporates and I become curious or compassionate. I find the “letting go” I practice in my prayer time changes me and the way I live my life.

Jesus gave us the ultimate example of letting go. Even he struggled in the garden with his Father’s will. Yet he surrendered. And as his life ebbed from him as he hung on the cross, was able to stay open the incredible Love that sustains us all, and give comfort to the man crucified beside him.

This surrender takes practice and Centering Prayer is the best way I’ve found of learning how to do so. I can show up for prayer time. And I trust that God’s power is working in my life. Especially when more and more I see the choices I make between love and fear, disconnection and self-righteousness or connection and understanding. Our choices create our experience to a large extent. Life seems more and more miraculous to me.

Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault says, “Contemplative practice changes *how* we think, not *what* we think. We put on the Mind of Christ in a real sense, not a metaphorical way.” Our thoughts become “the thoughts of our hearts” informed by Love, not the puny thoughts of our own minds.

This past year has been one of enormous challenges and changes for my family and I. And yet it has strangely been one of the most peaceful and love-filled times in my life. Coincidence? I don't think so. I marvel as I find myself being changed from the inside out in ways I could never have asked for or imagined. Our God is an awesome God.

It's as simple as showing up and letting go of our own stuff. Rev. Bourgeault suggests that when Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest....learn from me and you will find rest for your souls," (Matt 11:28 – 30) that he was referring to his life of *kenosis*... of letting go. That in modeling trust and the ability to let go, Jesus has shown us the way to peace. It's in living this way, His way, that our burdens will be light. And we know that we are never alone.

All Centering Prayer requires is that we show up, and that our intention is to be led by our Master. Why is something so simple, so difficult for us? In Centering Prayer we don't need any gadgets, candles or even very much time. Yet we struggle. Time and time again, we fall and turn away, get lazy and succumb to the desires of this world. But without judgment from ourselves or God, we are invited to return.

In the words of Rumi, the Sufi poet:

Come, come whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vow a thousand times.
Come, come yet again, come.

Selinde Krayenhoff is a writer, community worker and teacher/facilitator/keynote speaker. In August she moved to Ladysmith to be with her husband, Jim Holland who was appointed rector of St. John's there in November 2006.

She and Jim started *Island Parent Magazine* in 1987 and have two grown sons. She serves on the board of the Contemplative Society.