

To be used in Elder Training and prepared by Rev. Marilyn McKelvey Tucker-Marek

Contemplative Prayer

The breath prayer is a type of contemplative or centering prayer. One form of the breath prayer uses an ancient prayer called the

Jesus Prayer:

*Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
have mercy on me,
a sinner.*

“This prayer is based loosely on the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 8:9–14 in which the tax collector says, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner’ (v. 13). One phrase of the Jesus Prayer is prayed on each breath, with the breaths providing a rhythm for the prayer.”¹

Suggested Applications for the Session

As a session consider adapting the Jesus Prayer for a specific meeting or situation. First, chose a name for Jesus which illustrates a particular attribute of his which you wish to aid or guide you, and trade this name out for “Son of God” in the second line of the prayer. Next, compose a brief request based on the desire underlying the name of Christ you chose, and trade that out for the last line (there are a few examples of this kind of adaptation below). Then pray this new Jesus Prayer together as a session.

Don’t hesitate to pray the prayer many times through, either by praying silently and breathing together or by speaking the prayer softly in rhythm together.

Notice the ways that crafting a simple prayer together, and then praying in unison together helps you synchronize, center yourselves in the moment, and set a sacred tone for the business before the session. You might also consider the Jesus Prayer (or an adapted form of it) between each part of your meeting.

The Jesus Prayer may also be incorporated into the worshiping life of the congregation, by including it regularly as a part of the prayer of confession. The whole congregation may find such a simple prayer a deeply meaningful way to engage in confessional prayer as part of their daily prayer practice. Such a practice helps disciples cultivate humility before God and neighbor.

**Lord Jesus Christ,
Prince of Peace,
have mercy on me.
I need your peace.**

**Lord Jesus Christ,
Bread of life,
have mercy on me,
feed me.**

**Lord Jesus Christ,
Light of the World,
have mercy on me,
shine your light in me.**

**Lord Jesus Christ,
True Vine,
have mercy on me,
help me abide in you.²**

¹ Baab, Lynne M. *Joy Together*. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY. Kindle Edition. 2012. p. 67-68.

² Ibid. p.68.

Fasting**Joel 2:12-13**

¹² *Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.*

A Definition of Christian Fasting

“Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose, by an individual, family, community, or nation.”³

“Christian fasting is different than other kinds of fasting because it has a spiritual goal. A Christian fast comes from the desire to draw near to the Triune God and embrace God’s values revealed in Jesus Christ and made real to us through the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Suggested Application for the Session

Session members might covenant to fast for a period of time before a meeting at which a particularly difficult or divisive item will be addressed. The duration and form the fast will take should be agreed upon by all the session members. For example, the session might agree to fast from added sugars, caffeine, alcohol, and screen time for one to four hours before the meeting, and to spend some of that time in intentional prayer about the item of particular concern.

Fasting in this way, intentionally as a community, gives shared purpose to the fast while the fast itself creates space for God to speak to the session members. Importantly, the process of a communal fast includes sharing about and reflecting together on the experience of the fast and how the participants felt God’s presence and guidance during and following the fast. The session might open its next meeting following the fast with a conversation about the experience and what God has revealed through it. Although depending on the timing of the fast, it may end before the next meeting begins, the fast is not truly over until this communal reflection occurs.

Consider items your session currently faces about which, or occasions on which, it might be helpful to proclaim a communal fast. The session might also publicly announce their fast and invite the whole congregation to participate as able.

³ Baab, Lynne M. Joy Together. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY. Kindle Edition. 2012. p.41.

Hospitality

Matthew 25:34–35: *Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*

A Definition of Hospitality

“Hospitality means receiving the other, from the heart, into my own dwelling place. It entails providing for the need, comfort, and delight of the other with all the openness, respect, freedom, tenderness, and joy that love itself embodies.”⁴

Suggested Applications for the Session

Consider the space and routines used for your session meetings. Do they create a hospitable atmosphere? Do they see to the needs and comfort of the session members (including the pastor/moderator)? Do they provide for openness, respect, freedom, tenderness, and joy?

Brainstorm ways to make the session meeting more hospitable. For example, if session members come to the meeting directly after a work day, are nourishing refreshments provided? Is the seating comfortable for all of those who participate? Is the space a comfortable temperature when people arrive?

Session members might consider taking turns serving as the host of the meeting, and seeing to the tasks necessary to create a hospitable space.

Practicing hospitality as a session may help the session view everything the congregation does through the lens of hospitality. Who is made to feel welcome, how so? Where? In the building? On the playground? In worship? Online?

How can the congregation practice greater hospitality?

⁴ Thompson, Marjorie J. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Newly Revised Edition. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY. Kindle Edition. 2014. p.133.

Thankfulness

*O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for God's steadfast love endures forever; (Psalm 136:1)*

A Reflection on Thankfulness

“Prayers of thankfulness enable us to see what God has been doing and where God has been working. Prayers of thankfulness enable us to notice the specifics of God’s work and the patterns of God’s goodness in our lives and the lives of others. Prayers of thankfulness make us stop and look.”⁵

Suggested Applications for the Session

Consider ways in which thankfulness could be incorporated into the rhythm of the session meeting. Do you offer a prayer of thanks at the beginning or end of the meeting? What about between some of the different parts of the meeting?

What would it be like for each elder to share something they are grateful for about the life of the congregation and/or its community, before making their report?

What would it be like to, as a session, say thank you to each member for the work they have done since the last meeting? You could simply go around the room and say in unison, “Thank you _____” filling in each session member’s name. Alternatively, you could make it a prayer by shifting the phrase slightly to, “God, thank you for _____.” (Again, filling in each session member’s name.)

What would it be like for the session to write thank you notes to members of the congregation for their work in the church? This could be organized by elder care group. Session members, by watching for reasons to say thank you, may find they feel less alone in the work of serving the congregation. Congregation members, in receiving thank you notes, may feel more appreciated and valued. This practice creates the space to grow a culture of greater gratitude and generosity within the congregation.

⁵ Baab, Lynne M. Joy Together. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY. Kindle Edition. 2012. p.23.