

“Thirty Days of Living Prayerfully”

Sandy Reimer

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GREETING OF THE DAY

I arise, facing East. I am asking toward the light.
I am asking that my day shall be beautiful with light,
That all around me and within me shall be filled with the light.
I am asking for the courage to go forward through the shadow.
I am asking toward the light. I am asking toward the light.

MORNING PRAYER – *adapted from J. Philip Newell's Sounds of the Eternal*

In the gift of this new day, in the gift of the present moment,
In the gift of time and eternity intertwined,
let me be thankful,
let me be attentive,
let me be open to shinings of Your light,
In the gift of this new day, in the gift of the present moment,
In the gift of time and eternity intertwined. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 - You shall love the Lord your God,
with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,
And you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Psalms 90, *as translated by Stephen Mitchell, A Book of Psalms*

O God, through all generations, you have been our strength and our home.
Before the mountains were born or the oceans brought to life,
for all eternity, you are.

A thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it passes.
Teach us how short our time is; let us know it in the depth of our souls.
Fill us in the morning with your wisdom; shine through us all our lives.
Let our hearts soon grow transparent in the radiance of your love.
Show us how precious each day is; teach us to be fully here;

SERMON - Confessions first: When the idea for this worship theme came up— that each of us four ministers would pick a Biblical practice to live by for the month of October – I confess to being resistant. All I could think about was the book “A Year of Living Biblically,” A.J. Jacobs account of his attempt to abide by every single rule of the Bible as literally as possible. While Jacobs did include the Ten Commandments and the Golden rule in his observances, many of the Biblical rules he followed were male-oriented, such as not shaving his beard and carrying around his own special chair so he didn’t have to sit where a menstruating woman may have been seated. Jacobs even kept little pebbles in his pocket in case the need arose for him to stone an adulteress. As I imagined my part in this theme, I got stuck in my own literalism, thinking that, as the only woman on our ministry team, the rules would be available for me to follow would involve either ritual cleansing baths or spending most of a week in the red tent. As you can

imagine, I was pretty reactive to all of this until the discussion moved beyond that particular book. We began to look at the bigger picture of "Thirty Days of Living" within the framework of a spiritual practice that had Biblical resonance but not literalism. We left the specifics of each of our practices open over the summer to see what might emerge.

In August, I was in New York City, walking around with my son Chris, searching for good street food for lunch, when I saw a cab pull over to the curb not far from Central Park. The Muslim cab driver got out, put his prayer rug on the sidewalk, and knelt down to pray. Muslims pray five times a day, 365 days a year. These prayers are spaced throughout the day, so that the person praying is constantly reminded of God's presence. The image of this cab driver stuck with me, so I decided to spend thirty days incorporating a daily ritual of prayer into my life.

I knew that I needed some structure to make this work for me. So I did a little research. In Jewish tradition, three prayer observances are offered each day - at morning light, in the afternoon, and at nightfall. Early Christians also followed what is called fixed-hour prayer at six and nine in the morning, at noon, at three in the afternoon, and at six in the evening. In the Middle Ages, these Christian fixed prayer times became the eight divine hours of monastic life, which begin with matins in the morning and end with compline at night. When I looked for the Muslim prayer times, I discovered I could google an Islamic Prayer Scheduler, find the closest city in my time zone, which is Miami, and see that on last Sunday, October 31, Muslims in this time zone would be praying at 6:25 and 7:28am and at 1:05, 4:17, 6:40 and 7:45pm. That schedule changes a bit every day with the times of sunrise and sunset.

I was excited to find the tradition of fixed prayer in this multitude of religious faiths. Yet, when I tried to choose one, I felt a bit like Goldilocks: three times a day seemed too cold and eight was way too hot for me. Then I happened upon an article about the Benedictine monks in South Dakota at the Blue Cloud Abbey (doesn't that sound rather UCG-ish?) who pray four times a day. That I thought was just right, a worthy yet possible goal.

I programmed my new I-touch so that the word *prayer* appeared each day first thing in the morning, after lunch, at dinner, and before I went to sleep. I noticed that all the religious traditions had set prayers for each daily interval that were repeated throughout the week. There was no need to create four new prayers every single day. I also decided to commit to inter-faith diversity in my prayers. I began with the idea of praying a Native American prayer in the morning, Jewish prayers at midday, a Muslim grace at dinner time, and a Catholic night-time prayer. I quickly rediscovered one important thing about prayer for me: I can't pray a prayer I don't believe, and I can't pray to a God I don't believe in. So I used some of the prayers I had found; I pieced together phrases from others; and I created some prayers of my own.

I share my prayers with you as part of today's worship service. I began each morning by going outside, facing the east, and praying aloud the beautiful Native American invocation that is our call to worship. Then I went inside, lit a candle and used those three deep breaths to begin a time of silent meditation, after which I read the daily passage from Marv Hile's *Almanac for the Soul*. I then prayed aloud the unison prayer we used this morning after the opening hymn.

In mid-day, after lunch, I shut the door to my office and recited aloud the Jewish prayers: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." I then read aloud a psalm from Stephen Mitchell's Book of Psalms, and wrote for five minutes, reflecting on that psalm.

My third time of prayer coincided with dinner. Initially, this was the most difficult one, because I tried one grace after another, none of which worked for me. I set myself loose from someone else's words of gratitude and let this be the one time of day I prayed spontaneously, thanking God aloud for whatever bubbled up within me.

Before I turned out the light at night, I prayed the evening prayer that is printed at the end of this service. It is a combination of an Anglican prayer, a Catholic prayer and a poem.

What were my challenges and my learnings from this month of prayerful practice?

1) To my surprise, the set prayers worked very well for me. I have a left-over-from-being-a-Lutheran resistance to packaged prayers, remembering how the same liturgy every single Sunday page after page, year after year, became so rote and so numbing. Yet here I am, all these years later, realizing that these four rather short set prayers each day worked well for me, especially since I was praying so often. They allowed me to focus on the prayerful practice I had set before me without constantly trying to change the routine or the words of the prayers. That actually took a lot of pressure off the daily practice. It was comforting to start the day and end the day with the same prayers.

One huge benefit of using these set prayers each day is that I have now memorized them; they are a part of my life and I love that. Repeating the phrases "I am asking toward the light" and "In the gift of this new day" sets the tone for my morning. "What has been done, has been done. What has not been done, has not been done. I let it go" is a healing moment of release for me each night.

As a congregation, as a minister, as parents, this may be a very important reminder as we shepherd our children and youth in their spiritual foundation. I invite you to check out the creative ways that Heidi Stein incorporates learning important scripture passages and a variety of prayers in our children's curriculum.

2) This praying worked much better for me when I said the prayers aloud. Maybe that's because I'm an extravert and I tend to talk to think. Or maybe hearing the words, making the commitment to say them, rather than think them, anchored them in my soul.

3) I learned and re-learned a lot about commitment and regrouping. In the early weeks, sometimes I simply forgot to do the prayers. Sometimes what was going on in my life made it difficult to keep the routine. I was most successful with the morning prayer time. Even when I was rushed, or spending the night and morning with my kids and grandkids, I stepped outside first thing, faced the east, and greeted the day with those deep breaths and words of prayer. Most days, I was also able to meditate and use the daily reading as well.

As the weeks went on, I was more consistent in remembering to say the evening prayer before I turned off the light, so that it became very natural. And, with a few exceptions, I kept the practice of the dinner grace. It too became comfortable and effortless.

The hardest one was the mid-day prayer. It wasn't difficult to remember to say the words from Hebrew scripture. On weekdays when I could go to my office after lunch, I was often able to read the psalm and write my reflections. However, on week-ends, I rarely managed to do this writing part. Yet, when I reread those reflections that I did write, they are treasures that capture a flavor, a moment, of my life. I'll share one snippet, which I wrote half way through the second week. The Psalm I read was #13; the line that stood out was "Teach me to be patient, Lord; teach me to be endlessly patient." I wrote: "Patience, patience, patience – even with this daily practice of prayer, especially on those days when I forget more than I manage to remember in the midst of the pace of my life. Patience and regroup; patience and regroup."

And that's what I did: instead of immersing myself in denial or frustration or guilt, I simply and as kindly as possible re-committed and stepped back onto the path I had set for myself.

4) I had some moments when I clearly felt the tension between what was private and what was public, what was practicing my faith and what was imposing it on others. These moments happened with praying before dinner when I was in a restaurant or when I was with a group that was not connected with this church. In restaurants, I punted a bit. Sometimes I'd make a toast that was very much like what I prayed as grace; sometimes I asked everyone to share one good thing from their day. And sometimes, I decided not to impose this practice on others. One example was the night I was eating dinner with a group of noisy rowdy Jaguar fans after Jaguars had unexpectedly and soundly beaten the Colts. Like Andy said last Sunday, I think God forgives me, and I trust my fellow ministers to do so as well.

5) This prayerful practice made a difference in my life. The purpose of praying several set times each day, in Jewish, Muslim and Christian tradition, is similar to the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness and paying attention. This regular rhythm of prayer brings me into the presence of God throughout the day, helping ground me in what is important, in my true sense of who I am and what I am about. I walk out of the house each morning with a clearer and more peaceful spirit. The mid-day prayer slows me down and refocuses my perspective. The dinner grace lightens my spirit and directs the conversation in ways that are positive and joyful. And the night prayer is calming, giving me concrete images for blessing my day, blessing my sleep, and blessing those I carry in my heart.

6) Finally, sometimes a new level of spiritual practice happens as a result of a new experience of faith. Some flash of spiritual awareness or new social consciousness causes me to change the practices of my life. I believe differently, and so I begin to live differently. This is the way I usually think of transformation: that action and practice spring from the experience of faith.

Yet I realized in my weeks of living prayerfully sometimes a new experience of faith happens because as the result of a new level of spiritual practice. I decide to pray four times a day, and my faith deepens as a result. Sometimes if we live as though something were true, it becomes true. I attended to times of prayer, and an increasing experience of the presence of God and of the flowing waters of grace in my life followed that practice.

On the first of my thirty days, I wrote "This month I hope to plant myself near the flowing waters of God's presence, to be more aware of God's grace in my life, to be filled

and renewed.” That is truly what I have experienced; these prayers were not asking for things. Instead they took me to the place where the best things are. They will be an ongoing part of my life and my spiritual path.

REMEMBRANCE of UCG members who died since last All Saints’ Day

In the earliest Celtic traditions, people believed that this was the time of year when the souls of those who have died were particularly close to this world. On All Hallows Eve, they said, the veil between heaven and earth was wafer thin. Their celebration of All Hallow’s Eve became, of course, Halloween, but the wisdom of our Celtic heritage remains alive in what we call All Saints Day.

Paul Tillich once said that “saints are not saints not because they are particularly good, but because they are transparent for something larger than they are.” In that light, we remember today our saints. We remember them because they were part of the larger picture of our lives, because they were our particular fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, grandparents and children, friends, husbands, wives and partners – those who in some way helped us to become who we are and who we hope to be. We open our spirits and our hearts to their love and to the love of God, who sustains us all, on earth and in heaven.

We remember as well the saints of this church, whose names are listed on the framed manuscript on the easel in the foyer. We particularly remember today those UCG members who died in the past year. As I read their names and ring the bell, please hold these dear ones and their families in your prayers:

Wally Barry

Kathy Cantwell

Hannah Esser

Iris Greenfield

Deborah Harris

Jerry Young

"We make a great mistake when we think that people whose lives have been intimately woven into our own cease to influence us when they die. While they are living, they are many things to us. But with death, the essential thing that they have been in our lives is stabilized and all the rest is discarded. Those who have died become part of the dynamics of our soul. They sail on the seas of our spirit from the beginning to the end of our time."
from The Face Beside the Fire by Lauren van der Post.

***BENEDICTION -**

May God’s presence in your life, and in your prayers,
be as close to you as your breath,

And may you know what is unseen intertwined with what you see -
spirit and body,
angels and flesh,
heaven and earth –

all blessings of time and of eternity, now, tomorrow and forever more. Amen

EVENING PRAYER:

O God, let me be still this night in your presence, after a long day. What has been done, has been done. What has not been done, has not been done. I let it go.

Keep watch over me, dear God, this night. Give rest to the weary; tend the sick; bless the dying; comfort those who are in pain; and shield the joyous.

Let the quietness of your peace enfold me and all who are dear to me. Renew my spirit in the image of your love that I may awake to the freshness of the morning, that I may awake to the freshness of the morning. Amen.