

“Stuck in a Moment You Can’t Get Out Of”

Psalms 103:1-14

Romans 8:26

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For the past four weeks during this season of Lent we have been studying prayer, both the practice of prayer and our understanding of prayer. In our small group studies during the week and in our worship services on Sunday morning we began with a sort of a “prequel,” asking, “What are the reasons that we don’t pray? What prevents us from having a better prayer life?” Then, over the last couple of weeks we have begun exploring this idea about how we pray, when do we pray, what do we pray, to whom do we pray, what do we expect when we pray? During mid week bible study that I attend, we began to think together about some of the times when we naturally pray. We realized that there seem to be some times in our lives, maybe genetically or creatively wired into us by our creator, in which we naturally, almost involuntarily find ourselves in moments of prayer.

For some of us those come in moments of great joy; the birth of a child or the beginning of a new relationship. Sometimes we find ourselves out in nature, perhaps on the shore of the ocean or watching the sunrise in the mountains or at some other great vista and almost without thinking about it we realize we are lifting up prayers of thanksgiving to our creator for surrounding us with such beauty.

We also know all too well that there are times of tragedy and crisis in our lives that bring us to our knees in prayer; an untimely death, bad news from a doctor or surgeon for ourselves or someone we love; perhaps some other tragedy like the loss of a job or financial stability in our lives and we find ourselves, almost without realizing it, in the middle of a prayer to God—a prayer for help, for strength, a prayer for next steps.

For those of us, like all of us gathered here this morning who choose to be a part of a faith community, we gather in regular intervals to pray together in corporate worship. We employ prayers together of confession and thanksgiving and pastoral prayers; we engage together in these prayers as ways of encouraging and nurturing our faith and giving us nourishment for the journey ahead.

These are some natural times in our lives that we pray. But as we begin to think about our life of prayer in particular, and our spiritual journey in general, there are times in our lives that we get to a point where we feel like we’re stuck in a rut. We’re stuck in a moment we can’t get out of. We find ourselves in a place where it just doesn’t seem like there is anything new or fresh happening, like we’re just going through the motions. So this morning I thought that we should reflect together on three different practices of prayer. These practices may be a little bit unusual, maybe outside-of-the-box, things that you may or may not have seen or heard or even participated in, but might consider trying.

To begin, you've noticed that these screens of votive candles are in the front of the sanctuary this morning. This year we have started an informal Sunday evening worship service the first week of the month and one of the elements of that service is that people are invited forward during the opening song to light a candle. Lighting candles or candle light or fire in worship has been an ancient practice in our tradition and, in fact, in many faith and non-faith traditions. Since ancient times light and fire have been ways in reminding us that the presence of God is here among us. Our own Judeo-Christian history begins in the first chapter of Genesis with God creating light and calling it good. The young nation of Israel was led out of Egypt into freedom by a pillar of fire during the evening and a pillar of cloud during the day. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." Light has been a part of our tradition for a long time.

We think and talk and experience together a lot about light in worship. In fact, every Sunday candles are lit in worship as a way of reminding us of Jesus, the light of the world. In some traditions, there is a single Christ light as that reminder of Jesus Christ. In other traditions or times here, you might see two candles on a communion table or on an altar which most commonly signify Jesus fully human and Jesus fully divine.

This morning I invite you to consider lighting candles as part of your prayer practice, whether votive candles like this in worship or some kind of candle or candles in your own personal devotional prayer life. Some of you may be wondering if this doesn't sound a little bit too Catholic or Episcopalian, to light candles in worship. It is true that for many of us our primary encounter with candles, particularly these kind of candles has been an experience of attending a Catholic mass or Episcopalian service and certainly it is a more common practice in those traditions. But, I assure you, lighting a candle has not been copyrighted by anybody.

Specifically lighting a votive candle is consistent with a new movement in the church to reclaim some of our ancient mystery and practice; ways of embodying worship. For a long time during the enlightenment and the modern period there was an attempt to disembodied worship; that is, to separate our bodies and our senses from our practices in worship. Some were afraid that there was a danger in being too sensual, in the truest sense of the word—to engage our senses in worship. Opening ourselves to our senses might lead us down a slippery slope into which the spirit might lose its control to the body. The practices of faith that engaged the senses were put aside in favor of a more purely (and safely?) cognitive experience in worship. We're beginning, slowly, in our Reformed and other Mainline traditions to reclaim some of those things—candles being just one one.

The term votive actually comes from the Latin word for vow; meaning to dedicate or consecrate or offer in consequence of a vow or an intention. In other words, lighting a votive candle can be an expression of a vow or desire or wish. Many of us have experienced this in lighting a candle on behalf of ourselves or someone we love as a prayer lifted up. When we light candles during the Sunday evening services we talk about multiple ways we might understand that practice. We light a candle to remember God's presence in our midst. We light a candle as an offering of prayer up to God on behalf of ourselves or someone else. We light candles together in a community and see these multiple candle lights together and it is a powerful reminder that when gather together in the faith community, each of our little lights together shines as one great bright light together in faith.

Lighting candles may not be for everyone or for every time and place, but it can help us to embody, to experience something new in prayer. Lighting a candle can be a way of creating an environment, creating a focus point for us, to remember God's presence in our lives. As our youth sang a few moments ago, it also is a reminder to us that our lights go out into the world to light the way for others as we leave this service of worship. *Hold out your candle, they sang, go light your world.*

Secondly, this morning I want to reflect on the practice of walking a labyrinth. If you noticed the background imprint on your bulletin this morning, underneath the words both inside and outside is an image of a labyrinth. If you've heard about walking a labyrinth, or maybe someone has told you about it, you might have been like me when I first heard about it. It seemed a little bit too touchy-feely, artsy-fartsy, hippie guru, new age to me. I have since learned that the labyrinth experience is an ancient one and the more I explored it and began to participate in it, I found it deeply meaningful. This morning, our 7<sup>th</sup> grade Sunday school class made a labyrinth on the floor of the youth lounge downstairs that will stay throughout Easter season. I encourage you, if you have time after the service or anytime during the week, to come in and walk the labyrinth.

The modern labyrinth experience has ancient roots that go back thousands of years. There are mazes and ranges of different types of labyrinth designs found all around the world in many cultures and civilizations. They are carved into rock, in ceramic, in clay tablets, in mosaics; they're printed on manuscripts and there are stone patterns and hedges cut into fields in the shapes of labyrinths. The significance of them in various cultures is unknown, particularly the ancient ones. It's believed that the first encounter or interpretation of a labyrinth comes from the island of Crete. If you've ever been to Crete you may have encountered a very popular tourist attraction called the Palace of Knossos, it's the place that archaeologists have uncovered the ruins where they believe King Minos, of the Minoan empire, some 3,000 years ago ruled.

Part of the Greek mythology that accompanies that site is the legend of the Minotaur, a half bull-half man monster that was trapped in a labyrinth beneath the palace; trapped in the labyrinth so that he couldn't get out and be a threat to any one. Without going into too much detail about the mythology, Theseus trails thread behind him and works his way into the labyrinth to kill the minotaur on behalf of his beloved and follows his thread back out.

The problem with some of these ancient stories of labyrinth is that they can be a little confusing in relationship to the labyrinths we encounter today. That ancient labyrinth was a maze that was specifically designed to trick people, to make it difficult to get in and out. There were dead ends and places where the path would cross and leave you with a choice. The modern labyrinth, which traces its roots to Medieval cathedrals in Europe, was a pattern designed often in the floor that was meant to symbolize the journey of Christian faith, our spiritual journey. A single path led into the labyrinth to a central place and then back out again. There was no trick or maze involved. One of the purposes for the labyrinths was that people would come on pilgrimage and walk the labyrinth as a way of recreating in microcosm the Christian journey.

The idea was that you would start at the entrance of the labyrinth (this is the practice that is often used today), and say a simple prayer asking God to guide you and to speak to you in the process. During the journey towards the center of the labyrinth, one would reflect on their inward faith journey, asking to be freed from all the things that distract us from God, asking to be freed from our pride of wanting to control our life, shedding those things, purging those things that prevent us from a deeper relationship. Once inside, in the very center of the labyrinth, one would take time to pause. In some traditions there are different prayers said or different postures one assumes in the center place. However, one could just take time for silence, to let God speak having been freed of these things that distract or prevent us from hearing God. On the journey out of the labyrinth we integrate those things that God has said to us back into our daily life and begin to think about how God is calling us to live more faithfully and better serve our neighbors near and far.

One of members of our bible study this last week shared that a significant time for prayer for her is when she is walking her dog in the morning. We realized that like the labyrinth tradition, even on a walk outside, you could find the half-way point of that walk, and on the first half of the walk begin to reflect on your inward journey—the letting go. At the half-way point, you take some time for reflection and to allow God to speak to you (as much as your dog may allow you to take a break in the middle of your walk). As you finish the walk back to your house you reflect on that outward journey, integrating God's illuminations to those pieces of your life of faith, specifically in relationship to your neighbors and to your community.

Finally, this morning I want to think a little bit together about singing as prayer. As many of you know, my background is in music. My first career was teaching high school music. In fact, the whole idea about singing as an expression of faith deserves another sermon entirely. This morning I want to think specifically about music and song as prayer. The great 5<sup>th</sup> century bishop of North Africa, St. Augustine, once famously said, “Those who sing, pray twice.” He meant that the lyrics, the words of our songs are prayers in and of themselves. And, by singing these words of prayer, rather than simply saying or thinking them, we engage our whole bodies, our lungs, our mouths, our hearts in a way that adds a second, perhaps deeper, level of prayer to the words we sing.

One of the founders of our Reformed Protestant tradition, John Calvin, was in Strausburg when he first heard a singing congregation, singing not only the Psalms but also the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. He wrote that he was overwhelmed in the experience, moved to tears over the beauty and power of congregational song in worship. When he later returned to Geneva, he brought with him a tradition that would forever be identified as part of the Reformed church—singing together in worship. He would later say that in worship we are not just spectators who come to be enlightened or inspired or entertained by preachers and choirs, rather we gather as God’s people who come together to *do* something together, to worship God together in our songs.

Over the last few years there has been a lot of study and writing about the role of congregational singing in our life of faith. One of the insights that people have begun to think about is a distinction between two different kinds of songs. There are songs which we categorize as sequential or linear and songs that we categorize as cyclic or circular songs. Sequential or linear songs are the songs that we are most familiar with in our tradition. If you were to flip through a hymnal most of the examples you would find would be examples of this style. A sequential or linear song is one that has a beginning point and an end point and in three or five or six verses lays out a theological thought or provides some explanation of a scripture or an idea from our faith. Some tell a story or help us to understand a deeper concept about faith. The lyrics of all of the verses are strung together in one clear message with an obvious beginning and an obvious ending. That makes sense to us because it is probably the most common part of our tradition.

Cyclic or circular songs play a very different role in worship. The Medieval church had chants or songs of just a few words or a sentence or two; (for those of you who know music it would be typically four or eight measures of music) that would be sung over and over again in repetition. If you have encountered some of these songs in worship (as I have had the experience of introducing some of these songs in various churches), people are often a little puzzled at first if they haven’t encountered them before. *Why are we singing the same thing over and over, they say, what’s the point of that?* Of singing the short little

song, they might ask, *how many times are we going to sing this... two, three? When does the song begin, when does the song end?* They are a little puzzled when I say, *well, we'll just see how it goes.* Because they are not sequential, they are not necessarily meant to have a specific end points. They play a different function in worship or in our pray life. These cyclic or circular songs are meant to be repetitions of phrases or words that help us to center ourselves in prayer, so that while focusing on a particular idea, we might get lost in the lyrics, melody and harmonies and begin to open ourselves up to prayer in a different way. By engaging in song rather than simply words, it provides a way for us to connect a little more deeply, or at least a little differently, to our heart, to our soul, in worship. These songs are often used as ways of helping to engage a different part of their brain.

In contemporary Christian music, or praise and worship music, there are numerous examples of these short choruses that are repeated over and over again. In Reformed, Orthodox and Catholic traditions, more recently, there's been a tradition of incorporating music from a community called Taizé, in France. Taizé is a little town in France where a Christian retreat/conference center was founded during World War II. Over the years, it has grown to a place where tens of thousands of people from all around the world travel every year to sing and worship and study the Bible together. It's a phenomenal place and a phenomenal story about the Taizé community. In order for this multi-national gathering to be able to worship together, they needed to create simple songs that can be easily translated into multiple languages and then sung in this cyclic or circular fashion, over and over again, as way of centering themselves in prayer and worship.

We will sing one of those songs in a few moments. I am including at the end of this sermon a few resources if you want to learn more or try some of these ideas. For the sake of simplicity, we will only sing in English, rather some of the multiple languages that the Taizé songs are sung in.

I hope these three ideas; candles, labyrinths and sung prayers, can help you begin to think outside the box. For many of us, myself included, it is all too easy to get caught in the usual times and forms of prayer and suddenly to feel like we're stuck in this moment we can't get out of, stuck in a place where there's just not anything new happening. I find, for me, trying something new is just a way to release a new energy to connect with God and with myself and my Christian experience in a new way.

Jill is going to play once through the Taizé song printed in your bulletin—Bless the Lord My Soul, and then we will sing it several times as we pray these words together:

*Bless the Lord my soul, and bless God's holy name*

*Bless the Lord my soul, who leads me into light.*

Amen.

**Labyrinths:**

There is a labyrinth in the grass outside of the Women's Center at Lake Forest Hospital and there is a temporary one in the youth lounge at church if you want to try it. For more information online, try:

<http://lessonsforliving.com/labyrinth.htm> or

<http://www.labyrinthsociety.org/>

**Sung Prayer:**

For a history of Taizé and tons of resources including all of their songs, start at:

<http://www.taize.fr/en>

You may want to click on the "Prayer and Song" link in the middle of the page.

This music is distributed in the United States exclusively by GIA and you can order resources (and find another great background piece) at:

<http://www.giamusic.com/bios/taize>