

Sacred Rhythms

Chapters 4 & 5

Chapter 4 ~ Prayer: Deepening Our Intimacy With God

Let's begin with a prayer...*"Lord, teach us to pray."*

- How would you describe your prayer life? What are your prayer habits/practices? How do you feel about prayer?
- If a friend asked you "What is prayer? And can you teach me how to pray?", what would you tell them?

"Simply put, prayer is all the ways in which we communicate and commune with God. The fundamental purpose of prayer is to deepen our intimacy with God."

- Is this how you understand prayer? What are some of the ways in which you commune with God?
- This, of course, begs the question, *"Do you want to be intimate with God?"* (Remember the beginning chapter of this book emphasizes the importance of our wants/desires.) Does the possibility/opportunity of that excite you or unsettle you?
- Have you ever experienced *"...a time when prayer just doesn't work as it used to."*? Or, have you experienced times of doubt, confusion, dryness, or disillusionment with prayer? If you're comfortable, please share.
- What do you think about the idea that disappointment in our spiritual/prayer lives may be an invitation for growth and something deeper and richer?

Relationships are meant to grow, change, evolve. They are fluid, not static. This is true in human-to-human relationships as well as human-to-God relationships. This is why relationship skills/rules and emotional intelligence are needed in order to grow. Theology/doctrine, as important as it is, can only get us so far. Love, which is a relational dynamic, not a doctrinal one, is what shapes and forms us at a heart and character level...and that's the level in which God desires to heal, redeem, and transform us.

As we head into 2024, and our theme of Becoming..., a line from this chapter jumps out at me as appropriate and accurate, when RHB says, *"...it requires us to let go of what we have known in order to open ourselves up to something new."* The unfamiliar can, admittedly, be scary, but the question we want to ask ourselves is, *"Is God inviting me/us into something new? And, if so, do I/we trust that He's with us, that He's good and wise and knows what He's doing? Or do we want to just stick with what's known and comfortable...at the cost of what could be?"* Generally

speaking, people are ready/willing to change for one of two reasons: Either the pain of the present situation is unbearable/untolerable or the vision for what could be is so compelling.

- How ready and willing are you for something new, fresh, and, yes, at times challenging?
- Are you experiencing one of the two reasons that usually precipitate change? Explain.

RHB quotes the late Henri Nouwen, *“Prayer means letting God’s creative love touch the most hidden places of our being and prayer means listening with attentive, undivided hearts to the inner movement of the Spirit of Jesus, even when that Spirit leads us to places we would rather not go.”* RHB continues, *“Intimacy also requires risk—the risk of allowing someone to see me in my nakedness and vulnerability as well as in my strength and beauty. The dynamics that accompany the nakedness and vulnerability required for sexual intimacy are the very dynamics the soul experiences as it moves deeper into spiritual intimacy with God. It involves bringing more and more of myself into God’s presence and receiving more and more of God’s being into myself.”*

- These are powerful images. It harkens yet again to the question of what we really want. How are you processing all this in the depths of your being? Do you find yourself excited about, and drawn into, such a relationship? Or do you find yourself resistant to it and perhaps moving away from it? (Again, our recurring questions: What do you want? What do you sense going on inside yourself? There is no need to try to impress anybody...honesty will get us further than image-management.)

RHB cuts to the heart of the matter: *“...intimacy always leads us to a place where we are not in control.”* (emphasis added) Honestly, this is why most people do not have intimate relationships...even within marriages. Sometimes it is due to past hurts, even abuses/traumas. It's always an attempt to avoid hurt/pain. While this is understandable, we cannot deny the reality that God made us for relationships, for intimate relationships, primarily with Him, but also with others (though not with everybody...some people, sadly, are simply not safe enough to be trusted in intimate relationships).

- How much do you need to be in control? What are some of the ways in which you try to gain/maintain control?
- As you analyze/examine your history of relationships, how has the need/desire for control been at play?

Intimacy, rest, silence, self-emptying (so as to be able to receive), just “being with”...these are some descriptions of the kind of prayer that goes beyond words. These descriptions don’t sound like religious duty but rather relational delight.

- Do you believe, in the depth of your being, that this is the sort of relationship with God you were designed/created to have? Do you believe that God desires and enjoys you that much? And, yet again, is this what you want?

- Do you think the world around us sees Christians who are enjoying this type/level of relationship with God? If not, what do you think would change or happen if they did?

Prayer is as readily available, and as important, as breathing. Interestingly, the word for “Spirit” (both in Hebrew and Greek) is the same word as air, wind, breath.

- What do you think of the concept/practice of “breath prayer” as RHB presents it?

I love this statement, “...*listening to our deepest longings and desires in God’s Presence.*” That is the invitation. That is the journey of discovery/exploration. This is where the really good growth and maturity comes from. This captures the heart of this book in a nutshell. May we be/become people who do this well.

A Church ought to be a praying community...not simply a bunch of individuals who pray, but a community that prays together.

- What is your experience of praying with others? How do you feel about praying with others? (For example, is it something you’re drawn to or that you resist? Do you find it comforting and encouraging or anxiety-producing? And why do you feel the way you feel? Can you name it?)

Read Romans 8:22-27. Notice all the groaning: creation groans; we(humans) groan; even the Spirit groans. Groaning comes from a place deep within. And that’s where we encounter God. So we need not worry about having the right words or even knowing what to ask for. Just come to God with our deepest needs and longings, and those of the people we care about.

- Describe a time of prayer when you didn’t know how or what to pray. How do you feel hearing that when we are deep and desperate God is right there?

RHB writes, “*it has become increasingly difficult for me to distinguish prayer as a spiritual discipline from all the others. The longer I journey in the spiritual life, the more I experience all of life as prayer and the other disciplines as different ways of praying.*” This is a common refrain for those well acquainted with the more contemplative aspects of our faith. May we be/become those who embrace this more mystical dimension of our walk with Jesus.

Chapter 5 ~ Honoring The Body: Flesh-And-Blood Spirituality

We are holistic creatures...physical/material, emotional/psychological, mental/intellectual, spiritual, social/relational...all wrapped up. We are embodied souls. So when one aspect of our being suffers, all parts of our being are affected. This is by God’s design. This is why it is important to pay attention to the totality of our being. Sadly, we have often been conditioned to think dualistically...i.e. in two separate categories—the physical and the spiritual—and then to elevate the spiritual. The main problem with this approach is that it doesn’t line up with reality, with how God made us.

- Take inventory of your physicality. Do you get enough sleep? Are you drinking enough water? How are your eating habits? What kind of exercise are you doing?
- What is your relationship like with your body? What are some of your positive, healthy habits when it comes to your body, and what are some of your negative, unhealthy habits?
- What is some of the messaging you've heard from both the world and the Church when it comes to both the physical and the spiritual aspects of our being?
- In what ways are you thankful for and celebrate the body you have? In what ways do you struggle with the limitations of your body? How has your perception/perspective of your body changed over the years?

I appreciate this statement by RHB, "*And isn't heightened awareness of God's Presence with us and for us at all times, and our capacity to remain in vital connection with that Presence, what the spiritual journey is all about?*" It is a mysterious thing to consider how God's Presence is both transcendent AND imminent at the same time. He is both beyond AND within.

Let's quickly review some basic truths: God created our bodies and called them good. God became human (embodied) in Jesus. Jesus resurrected from the dead in a physical body. The Second Person of the Trinity sits at God's right hand as a flesh-and-blood human. The Holy Spirit indwells us in some wonderful, mysterious way. I remind us of all this so that we can marvel at the dignity and value God places on us as embodied souls. And it is within our bodies, not apart from them, that we experience God.

We can go as far as to say that our bodies are a sacrament, that is, a physical reminder of a spiritual reality. In fact, the human being is the first and most basic of all sacraments as we are the image of God. As such, we ought to treat our bodies, as well as the bodies of others, well...with the utmost respect, dignity, value, significance...NOT objectifying or commodifying them, nor ignoring them or taking them for granted. Our body is the first gift we're ever given, and we don't go anywhere without it. How we steward our bodies says something about how we feel about the Giver of the gift.

- What practices/habits have you developed (or do you desire to develop) in order to care for your body well?

"...the connection between physical and the spiritual...is a part of the goodness that God built into creation...God makes Himself known in this most basic aspect of our existence." Through our bodies we can learn to be intentional and attentive to our connection and communion with God.

- Have you tended to think of your body as a help or a hindrance in your connection/communion with God? How so, and why?

“Our bodies have much to tell us if we could only figure out how to listen...Most times, our body is the first to know if we are overcommitted, stressed, uneasy or joyful, and when we need to attend to something that is causing us pain or disease.” This truth was brought to my attention in an unexpected way. I have regularly seen a chiropractor for years. It was during our time in Flagstaff that my chiropractor at the time helped me see that my body knows and responds to stress before it registers in my mind. I can relate to Elouise Renich Frasure, who RHB quotes, when she says, *“I can’t trust my mind as often as I trust my body. My mind tries to talk me into business as usual, but my body isn’t fooled.”*

This part of RHB’s book brings to mind another important and fascinating book called *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk. You can Google summaries about it and even short videos to familiarize yourself with it. Here’s one example...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSCXyYuT2rE>

- Have you learned to listen to your body? How so? What does your body tend to inform you about? How might God be trying to communicate with you through your body?

In Luke 10:27-28 Jesus affirms the most important commandment and what must be done to inherit eternal life, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”* Notice how holistic and integrated it is—heart, soul, strength, mind, relationships. God wants all of us and all of our life...and He deserves it. Yet, we are good at, or perhaps we’ve been trained in, compartmentalizing. But all aspects of us affect every other aspect of us. Again, this is by God’s desire and design. We need to learn and to develop the skills and practices/habits of bringing ALL of ourselves to God.

- How has this chapter expanded your understanding of prayer? How do you feel invited to use your body in prayer?
- *“...life lived fully in the body is the truly spiritual life.”* How are you feeling invited to integrate the physical part of yourself with the spiritual part of yourself? How might you get more “in tune” with your body?
- How might we, as a community/church family, make our corporate worship more “physical”? How might we utilize more of our bodies in worship?

I (Meg) have to address the elephant in the room that this chapter leaves for us. We know that we are created in the image of God; we can agree on that. RHB, though, does seem to ignore the fact that science informs us that there are, at minimum, three genders. As a person that does not fall neatly into the false dichotomy that is presented on pages 82-83, I can say that even though this section is problematic we do not need to throw the whole chapter out. Intersex people exist and that is okay and we are still created in the beautiful image of God. RHB is clearly going to lean into traditional marriage values and traditional gender roles, and that is okay. For some people, those ideas make the most sense. We do not need to throw the baby out with the bath

water. Because she is very right about our bodies being holy and set apart. I can honor God with my body the same way a cis person can. I am still a proponent of monogamy, respectful partnerships, mutual love and admiration. Sexuality is not, now or should have ever been, a center circle issue and we need to let it go back into the outer circles of charity where it belongs. While my sexuality and genetic make-up affect me, they do not define me. To be quite frank, it is one of the most boring parts of my life.

Soul Training Exercises ~ Breathe & Pray In Tune With Your Body...plus a Bonus

This week we'll be combining the practices described at the ends of chapters 4 & 5...since they really go together so well. Try to do this at least a few times this week. (Again, below is just a brief summary, the book has the fuller descriptions.)

Breath Prayer

Spend time this week coming up with a Breath Prayer...a short prayer that can quickly center you, remind you of God's Presence with you. Ideally, it's a short phrase that captures your deepest desire/longing and can be prayed through the simplicity of inhaling and exhaling.

Breath Prayer can be used to start your time with God, or can be used as a quick "time out" throughout the day.

Pray In Tune With Your Body

Sit in a comfortable position. Take inventory of your body. Notice your breathing; notice any tension or tightness (pay particular attention to your neck and shoulders...places we often hold tension); notice your stomach; are you experiencing any discomfort or dis-ease? Is there anything your body is trying to "tell" you? Additionally, take stock of how you've been caring for your body lately.

Allow this exercise of taking inventory of your body, settling into your body, to begin your time of prayer, and perhaps to even guide your prayer time.

Bonus ~ Use Your Senses

Our body is equipped with five wonderful senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell), as part of God's good design. This exercise is designed for us to be mindful, and thankful, for our senses.

Go outside. (Yes, I realize it's winter...so dress accordingly, bundle up as needed.) You can either sit, stand, or walk. Consciously take in all that your senses are receiving.

- What do you SEE? Note the colors, the beauty, the combination of nature and human design, etc.
- What do you HEAR? Do you hear birds, traffic, wind? Simply notice it.

- What do you SMELL? Can you pick up any fragrances or aromas? What's different outside compared to inside?
- What do you FEEL (physically)? The sun on your skin? A chill in the air. The ground under your feet? Feel (pun intended) to touch trees or other plants.
- What do you TASTE? (You may need to wait until you're back inside for this one.) Allow yourself to truly savor whatever you eat or drink. Don't just consume, but enjoy.

Share all of these experiences with God in gratitude.

*** (I recognize that, like other parts of our body, our senses often decline as we age. I also realize that some were born without the use of some of their senses or other bodily functions. Even so, our body, with all its capabilities and limits, is part of our story...our soul is embodied in it. Through it we commune with God. At the same time, it's important to be sensitive and mindful of other people's experiences in their bodies.)***