A Beginner’s Guide to Centering Prayer

Prayer takes on many forms. Sometimes we talk out loud. Sometimes we sit quietly, thinking thoughts in our mind to God. Sometimes we follow a pre-written guide like the daily office. Centering prayer, also called listening prayer or contemplative prayer or meditation, is another method of orienting ourselves around God’s presence and activity in our lives.

Life is relentless. We live busy lives marked by to-do list items that like Medusa’s snakes multiply each time we cut one down. Our lives are oppressed by the tyranny of the urgent.

Where does one find God in all of that frantic, frenzied mess?

Centering prayer is a means of sitting still in the chaos, of setting boundaries against multi-tasking, so called “productivity” and defiantly crying, “You shall not pass!” Centering prayer is a way of embracing quiet and making ourselves available to God. Centering prayer teaches us how to actively listen to God.

Stillness in the Bible

One of my favorite Jesus stories is found in Mark 4 (also in Matthew 8 and Luke 8). Jesus falls asleep in a boat. A violent storm comes up. In a panic, the disciples wake up Jesus. Jesus tells the wind and waves, “Silence! Be still!” While the text doesn’t say this, I envision Jesus curls back up on his pillow and falls asleep again while the disciples stand there slack jawed. And I think that the point of the story is to have a faith, not so much that stills the storms, but rather to have a faith so overwhelmingly peaceful that storms don’t wake you. Stillness conquers storms.

To the prophet Elijah, God invites him to witness his presence. But it’s not in the overt, powerful, obvious places. Not in the storm. Not in the earthquake. Not in the fire. It’s in a gentle whisper where Elijah finds God. It may not be in the podcast or the praise music or the big, loud worship service that God speaks us. It may be in the quiet of our own inner life.

The various psalmists write, “O God, we meditate on your unfailing love as we worship in your Temple” (48:9). Also, “Help me understand the meaning of your commands, and I will meditate on your wonderful deeds” (119:27). And again, “I will meditate on your majestic, glorious splendor and your wonderful miracles” (145:5). Mindfulness to God’s presence and activity in our lives is marker of God’s people.

Centering prayer is a method that leads us in this mindfulness. Here are a few simple steps for beginning a habit of centering prayer.

Choose a word or phrase

Choose something simple, like “grace” or “love” or “abba.” The intent is not to ponder on this word but rather to have an anchor when distractions come. This word or phrase draws our attention back to the God who is present before us.

Centering prayer is a method. It’s a method that facilitates a relationship. There is no wrong way to pray. We are simply attempting to make ourselves present and attentive to the God who made the universe. This word or phrase is a symbol of our intentionality and consent to God’s presence with us.
**Sit comfortably**

Close your eyes. Turn of the TV and the music. Eliminate as much visual and auditory distractions. Breathe in. Breathe out. Slowly. **If you need to settle down, I start by taking deep breaths.** Pay attention to your breathing deeply. This simple practice is the first step in quieting the frantic “monkey brain” we constantly endure.

If you’re just starting out, set a timer for 3 to 5 minutes. That just might feel like an eternity. It may go by as fast as you blink. See if you can gradually work your way to 20 to 25 minutes. You may find that it takes you the first five minutes just to get the “hamster wheel” in your head to stop.

**When distractions come, re-center on your word.**

Distractions will come. The next thing on your to-do list. The grocery list. A conversation you had yesterday. An email that needs to be sent. Don’t resist these. This is normal. But set them aside. Come back to your word or phrase. This may feel like balancing across a tightrope.

**When stray thoughts come to mind, return to your word as a means of training your brain to sit still.** Don’t beat yourself up when your mind wanders. Distractions themselves aren’t necessarily a hindrance to us but the emotional frustration for not getting it right certainly is. This is a practiced skill of learning to turn down the inner noise. I’ve never seen a baby quit trying to walk because it fell down. Get back up. Come back to your word.

As rational beings, we default to thinking our prayers. But in prayer we encounter God, not only with our minds, but also our bodies and hearts. In centering prayer we pull back the reins on the participation of our minds that so often tend to run away with how we attend to God. And it may be that we find thoughts coming to mind that are God’s part of the conversation.

**Conclude in silence**

When the timer goes off, resist the urge to jump back up and out into the fray of activities and busyness. Sit in the quiet. Notice your breathing. Feel the presence of your own body.

**Aim to re-enter the thoughts and activity of your life from a place of God’s presence rather than your own initiation.** Know the true source of your life. Remember that centering prayer is about cultivating a relationship with God. Active listening is necessary for every relationship we experience. God is not “the Force,” but a personal being.

**Like anything, centering prayer requires practice.** You’ll fall down. You’ll likely get frustrated. It’s a skill that requires constant practice and yields transforming benefits. Commit yourself to it each day for a week and see what happens.