

Attending to God's Voice

Prayer...is being awake to God in us...[then] we can increasingly see God in the world around us.

Prayer helps us stand in the presence of God with all we have and are: our fears and our anxieties; our guilt and shame; our sexual fantasies; our greed and anger; our joys, successes, aspirations, and hopes; our reflections, dreams and mental wandering; and most of all our family, friends, and enemies—in short all that makes us who we are. With all this we have to listen to God's voice and allow God to speak to us in every corner of our being.¹

Henri Nouwen

I would rather show someone my check book stubs than talk about my prayer life...I would rather confess...that I am overly fond of Bombay Sapphire gin martinis than confess that I am a prayer weakling. To say I love God but I do not pray much is like saying I love life but I do not breathe much...[I've had an inkling] that prayer might mean something more than getting down on my knees in public or in private to address God in a way that is respectful, focused, unselfish and theologically correct enough to merit God giving up some time to listen.²

Barbara Brown Taylor

Taylor's honest and humorous confession reveals the challenge of growing and maintaining a life of prayer. There are lots of "ways" to pray. The Book of Common Prayer lists seven different kinds of prayer: Adoration; Praise; Thanksgiving; Penitence; Oblation; Intercession; and Petition. None of these categories of prayer are for winning God's attention, but for enriching our interaction with God.

In our mentoring time we want to focus on one form of prayer which is not listed above: listening. A case can be made that listening to God is the basis of all spiritual life. The Bible certainly suggests that responding to God is the main event in a life of faith. Mother Teresa said it this way, "God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer."

¹ *Spiritual Direction, Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*; Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen & Rebecca J Laird; pp. xvi-xvii.

² *An Altar in The World*; Barbara Brown Taylor; pp. 176-177. [Taylor is adjunct professor of spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary]

Henri Nouwen taught and practiced what he called three classic spiritual disciplines which help create space for God in our lives:

- ***Looking Within To The Heart***—the practice of listening prayer
- ***Looking To God In The Book***—the practice of reading the Bible in a way not to be instructed, informed or inspired, but formed into an obedient person
- ***Looking to Others in Community***—where through worship and liturgy and community life the fullness of Christ is being manifested.³

In this section we will focus on the practice of listening prayer.

We said in the introduction to *Telling Your Story* that one of the characteristics of mature faith is the learned ability to “see God at work” in our story, in other’s stories, and amidst the chaos in the world. We described the trailhead orientation as learning to see God in your life story. The first waypoint on the journey to the summit of a worthy, mature, healthy, and robust life in Christ is to learn to listen to God. After you listen, you will instinctively know what and how to pray.

Listening Prayer has been practiced for centuries as a spiritual discipline among Christians who believe that God has been concerned for our relationship with Him long before we became concerned for our relationship with God. Listening Prayer is based on the belief that God speaks to us continually through Jesus Christ, through the Scriptures, through creation, and through the events of our lives. All these are initiatives God takes to make Himself known to us. Listening prayer is our response to God’s initiative.

For those who are only use to talking at God this spiritual discipline takes some time to learn. But once you learn to listen, you are likely to sense a most personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. God speaking and you listening are all about relationship.

³ *Spiritual Direction, Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*; Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen & Rebecca J Laird; pp. xviii-xix.

Spiritual Exercise: Learning to Listen to God

1. Goals:
 - a. to learn how to quiet yourself
 - b. to learn how to attend to God
 - c. to learn how to attend to what God stirs in you and speaks to you

2. To be done together with the Soul Friend Mentor leading
 - a. Choose a scripture text for this exercise in listening prayer [from the list below]
 - b. Choose a comfortable posture
 - c. Ask God for the grace to experience His personal presence
 - d. Read a Scripture portion slowly a couple of times allowing the words to wash over you
 - i. Notice what words, phrases or images stand out or touch you
 - ii. Rest with that word, phrase, or image
 - e. Now, listen to your heart—and notice what feelings are stirred by this word, phrase, image
 - i. See the list of feeling words as needed
 - f. Speak to God
 - i. about the word, phrase, or image that caught your attention
 - ii. about particularly the feelings and the intensity of feeling that this stirred in you
 - g. Lastly, pause and listen to God
 - i. Ask God if there is anything else he wants to impress upon you at this time
 - ii. notice how God responds to you (likely with a word, phrase, or image)

3. Discuss this experience
 - a. Share what this experience was like for you as well as what happened [in “d”; “f”; and “g” in #2]

4. Consolation and desolation
 - a. Share a desolation [pick one question to answer]
 - i. *For what am I least grateful?*
 - ii. *What gave me the least life?*
 - iii. *When did I feel like I didn't belong?*
 - iv. *When did I give and receive the least love?*
 - v. *When was I saddest?*
 - vi. *What was the low point?*
 - vii. *Where did I feel most distant from God?*
 - b. Share a consolation from the last month or last week [pick one question to answer]
 - i. *For what am I most grateful?*
 - ii. *What gave me the most life?*
 - iii. *When did I feel like I belonged?*
 - iv. *When did I give and receive the most love?*
 - v. *When was I happiest?*
 - vi. *What was the high point?*

vii. Where did if feel most cared for by God?

- c. Take the your answer to “4-a” and make it the subject of listening prayer
 - i. Speak to God
 - 1. about particularly the feelings and the intensity of feeling that this stirred in you
 - ii. pause and listen to God
 - 1. Ask God if there is anything He wants to impress upon you about this desolation this time
 - 2. notice how God responds to you (likely with a word, phrase, or image)
 - iii. Discuss this experience.

5. Assignment

- a. Choose 3 scriptures and one consolation or desolation for listening prayer and journal your experience and share them at your next meeting.

Scriptures for Listening Prayer

Experiencing God's Love

Isaiah 55: 1-5	Come to me; listen and your soul will live.
Matt. 11:28-30	Come to me with your burdens and I will give you rest
Jer. 29:11-14	I know the plans I have for you
Psalms 139 portion	God knows me through and through
Isa. 43: 1-5	Do not be afraid, I have redeemed you
John 15: 1-17	Make your home in me as I make mine in you.
Deut. 7:7-8	I choose you. I set my heart on you and chose you... not because you are so great but because I loves you

Meaning, Direction, Purpose in Life

Genesis 1:2-4	God looks at what He made and found it good
Psalms 8	God made us a little lower than the angels
Phil 3:1-10	If only I can gain Christ

The reality of sin and how it affects our relationship with God

Psalms 51	Have mercy on me and create a clean heart in me
Ezek. 36:24-29	I will give you a new heart and a new spirit for your stony heart and spirit
Rom. 7:14-24	I cannot understand my own behavior
Luke 15:11-32	The father cuts off the prodigal son's confession of guilt and failure so that he can celebrate his son's return

What it means to grow in a personal relationship with Jesus

Matt. 4:18-22	The calling of the first four disciples
Mark 4:33-41	The calming of the storm

Mark 8:27-9:1

Peter's confession, Jesus' affirmation and rebuke