

When I attended a conference on prayer a few months ago, they asked us participants to try out some prayer stations during our worship service. At one station we were supposed to stand in a circle and throw a beach ball around, and every time we threw the ball, we were supposed to silently say prayers of thanks.

At another station we were individually supposed to stand inside these hula hoops and imagine that we were inside our own little cones, and say prayers for ourselves and our individual needs.

Another station had us standing again in a circle, holding hands and saying silent prayers for the communities to which we belonged – our families and congregations and communities and also prayers for the world.

I found that I could not pray when I was at the station where we were supposed to be in our own little cone inside those hoops. For me, at that point in my life, I did not want to be in solitude. I didn't want to be alone and so as I was standing inside that cone, I was jealously watching the folks that were throwing the beach ball around.

And then when I got to the station where we were holding hands and praying for the community, I found that my heart was right there. I realized that at that moment, I needed to be in community. Maybe I wouldn't have felt the same way the next day or even the next hour, but for that moment, my spirit longed to be in a community rather than alone.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a pastor during World War II and who was hanged by the Nazis, wrote about the gift of community, especially of a community who worships together. He says, “It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world...not all Christians receive this blessing...the imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, they stand alone.”<sup>1</sup>

To have a church community at all is by the grace of God. To have been gathering here as a church community for 156 years is truly by God’s grace.

We, as a congregation, have a community of people who proclaim Jesus as Lord, who participate in the sacraments of communion and baptism, and who gather as worshippers once or twice a week. It truly is by God’s grace that we are able to gather and to participate as fellow believers in Jesus Christ.

You may be wondering what it means for you, exactly, to pray in a community. If you come to church, there are many ways throughout the service when we are praying together. During our confession/forgiveness, the prayers of the people, the offertory prayer, and the Lord’s Prayer. So you as worshippers have already experienced this.

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*, p. 18

But also, singing is a very special form of prayer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, “Why do Christians sing when they are together? The reason is, quite simply, because in singing together it is possible for them to speak and pray the same Word at the same time; in other words, because here they can unite in the Word...it is not you that sings, it is the church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song.”

So you see, we already incorporate ways of praying together as a worshipping community. But what about when we're not gathered here at church? What about prayer in community when we aren't on the church grounds?

Jesus tells us that community is where two or more are gathered. A community for you might be your spouse or your neighbor or your coworker. It might be your family or your friend.

Have you ever prayed with your family? With your spouse or your children or your close friend? Now I may be touching on some pretty challenging territory here, but it is something to consider. It is something that many of us may never have done before, but it can be powerful to pray with your close ones.

These prayers don't have to be lengthy or perfect in grammar or even make a lot of sense. To pray together as a community can simply be to say the Lord's Prayer together or to read a few verses of scripture together. One of my preferred ways to pray in a group is to do a popcorn prayer, where we each say one or two words of prayer as we feel moved.

When we pray together we come before God as God's children...as siblings together in God's family. When we pray together, we share God's arms being wrapped around us. We remember who we are, and who we are not...we especially remember whose we are.

When we pray together, we find ways to love one another even when it's very difficult.

The reading from Acts tonight speaks of the new community of believers who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." This was a brand new community that formed to spread the news of Jesus Christ and they were committed to being a prayerful community.

I'm sure they had it rough at times. I'm sure they had their arguments and power struggles and failures. But they also never forgot who they were. They never forgot who they were following, and that was Jesus Christ.

So with us. Prayer keeps us connected. It keeps us connected to Jesus, but it also keeps us connected to each other.

Sam Daily is going to sing a song for us. It is called "A Living Prayer" and as you listen, you are invited to be in silent prayer with this gathered community of believers. Amen.