

Spiritual Styles 2 of 6: Praying with style

Csinos – Roots article

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The second of a six-part series exploring the variety of ways in which people experience God and make sense of the world around them.

‘The shoe that fits one person pinches another; there is no recipe for living that suits all cases.’ Carl Jung



Introduction

We come to know and experience God in different ways. Within this diversity four vital spiritual avenues can be identified: the path of the intellect, the way of the emotions, the journey of mystery, and the road to justice. If we wish to nurture the spirituality of each individual we do well to take into account the different spiritual styles through which they can come to know and experience God in real, life-changing ways.

We continue our six-part series as David Csinos helps us to reflect on the impact of the four styles on the way we plan and provide worship and learning opportunities.

Recently I had the pleasure of being part of a conference about children’s spirituality in Chicago. As the team prepared for this event, their goal was to ‘bathe the conference in prayer’. But as the prayer-full planning process went on, the team members realised that they each prayed in very different ways.

Instead of arguing over the ‘right way to pray’, the team learned from one another and engaged in one another’s prayer practices. At the conference, they wanted to share this experience, so they began each plenary session by praying in one of the ways that they had shared as they prepared for the conference. One person led the gathered community in a worship song that she learned as a child. Another had us write prayers on pieces of paper and read them to one another. And yet another person ‘prayed in colour’ as she helped us pray by reflecting on beautiful works of art.

How we pray is intimately linked to the spiritual styles through which we live out the life of faith. Prayer is more than simply ‘talking with God’. It’s a spiritual communion with God, a spirit-to-Spirit connection with the Divine. And the ways in which we commune with God are related to our spiritual styles.

Word-centred prayer

For Christians with a preference for a word-centred approach to spirituality, prayer is – not surprisingly – based on words. This style values concreteness, so prayer often involves concrete discussions with God. Prayers may be spoken or written, said aloud or silently, alone or in community, but for the most part, people who prefer this style of spirituality pray with words. They commune with God through language. Since the precision and accuracy of words matters to these people, some people might prefer praying with pre-written prayers, or perhaps they may read Bible passages, creeds, or the words of hymns so that they can pay attention to the God whom they are talking with, rather than formulating the right words.

Emotion-centred prayer

People who practise emotion-centred spirituality put their whole being into their prayer life. Like their word-centred brothers and sisters, they perceive God in concrete terms, so they may also pray through words and language, as if they were talking to a good friend. But they tend to care less about the precision of the words they are using. For emotion-centred Christians, prayer involves opening up with God, being completely honest with God, and speaking to God with passion, zeal and fervour. They cry out to God with tears of joy and tears of sorrow. They seek to lose themselves in prayer and may put their bodies into their prayers by kneeling, falling prostrate, or raising their hands to God.

Symbol-centred prayer

The prayer life of symbol-centred Christians moves from concreteness to abstraction. Prayer becomes about dwelling in the presence of God, about sensing that God is near and listening for the voice of God. For these people, prayer may be more felt than spoken and it is often an individual activity, one that may become diminished if it is expressed or experienced with others. Prayer can take all sorts of forms within a symbol-centred spirituality, many of which draw from mystical Christian tradition and ancient spiritual practices like breath prayers, lectio divina, silent retreat and meditation on icons. Prayer is an act of emptying and opening oneself to the mystery that is God.

Action-centred prayer

Within an action-centred approach to spirituality, prayer is lived. People who value this style might say that their lives are their prayers. Rather than stopping to engage in quiet reflective prayer or gathering together for congregational prayer meetings, they pray through their actions. They commune with God through their activity, the ways in which they seek to bring in God's reign on earth. This isn't to say that action-centred people never stop working in order to pause and engage in quiet meditation. In fact, when times get tough in their mission to join God at work in the world, they may find themselves needing to pause in order to cry out to God in frustration and to question and listen to God about ways of moving forward.

Of course, differing spiritual styles are not the only variable in determining a diversity of prayer practices. For example, prayer traditions that characterise different Christian denominations, particularly the preferences in different congregations and in families, also affect the way people commune with God. But an individual's predominant spiritual styles will be one factor that shapes a preferred way of praying.

Nurturing many styles of prayer

It is important to remember that identifying a variety of spiritual styles is a way of describing broad approaches to the way individuals connect with God and express their innate spiritual desires. No one fits perfectly into a single style. While many people express a dominant or preferred spiritual style, they may find that other styles also influence their spiritual journey.

So also with prayer and, for some of us, communing with God must, necessarily, take a variety of forms.

So how do we ensure that our congregational prayers reflect all spiritual styles? What sorts of prayer practices should we include as we prepare church services, Sunday school, youth group, and other activities in our faith communities? In the remainder of this article, I'll share some prayer practices that reflect the preferences of each spiritual style. You don't need to try to cram every style of prayer into every church service or event, but over time you can make your faith community's prayer practices reflective of every spiritual style.

To nurture word-centred prayer, remember that the words used to speak of and speak to God are incredibly important, so having prayers pre-written can help ensure that our prayers appropriately convey a community's sense of orthodoxy (correct belief) and orthopraxy (correct practice). Try praying by reciting creeds, prayers passed down through tradition, and hymn lyrics that are appropriate to your context. These can be recited individually, by the entire community, or in a call-and-response fashion. Why not put white boards or paper on the wall so that congregants can write down their prayers and pray for one another? You can also nurture word-centred prayer by offering a 'model' that helps ensure that spontaneous prayers include different important elements (the 'ACTS' model – adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication – is one such approach).

Since emotion-centred people tend to pray from the heart rather than the head, be sure to include time for spontaneous prayer. They can get bogged down and frustrated if every prayer in a church service is printed and there is no space for personal, heartfelt conversation with God. Pray about what matters to you and your community – a crisis in your community, wisdom to discern future changes and decisions, a reason to celebrate the work of God in the congregation, and anything else that matters to the personal lives of members of your faith community. And don't use words alone. Encourage people to pray with their whole selves, feeling free to raise hands, kneel, sing, dance and cry out to God in laughter and sorrow.

In seeking to connect with symbol-centred Christians, it is helpful to remember that words can fall short in expressing the inner life; to become comfortable with periods of silence and stillness in worship is key. Such silence is not 'dead air time' – it's a space that offers room to connect with God beyond words. Try tapping into the rich history of Christian prayer practices. You can offer opportunities for people to pray by reflecting on icons, photographs, or paintings; through simple yoga or tai chi postures; by engaging in silent reflection; by looking for God in the little things in life; through breath prayers; or by walking a labyrinth. And don't be afraid to get creative as you engage in symbol-centred prayer practices – the possibilities for new prayer practices are endless!

Whether through words or silence, meditation or music, Christians who express an action-centred spirituality see prayer as intimately connected to God's vision for justice, care and peace. They remind us that prayer is political – it is tied to our visions for the world. So not only can churches include prayers that reflect the Christian desire to join God in healing the world, they can include tangible ways for all of us to make a difference – collecting offerings for important causes, welcoming strangers, refugees, and homeless people into the community, and much more. And since the quest for justice is ongoing, embodied prayer ought to spill over church services and into a community's mission in its corner of the globe.

Valuing difference

For ministers, teachers, and leaders in local churches, balance matters. It is all too easy for us to assume that our preferred way of praying is the one that we should share and encourage in our congregations. But when forms of prayer are determined by one particular spiritual style alone, those who prefer to connect with God in other ways may become frustrated or discouraged because they struggle to connect meaningfully through a style that is uncomfortable for them. And those whose preferred spiritual style does match their community's prayer practice may not be challenged to stretch themselves and encounter new ways to pray. When prayer practices that reflect different spiritual styles are experienced and encouraged in a faith community, a balance is achieved – a balance that nourishes and challenges all towards further growth.