

THE EDGE OF SILENCE
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection: *“Pray as you can and not as you can’t.”*

Wisdom of the Christian mystics

Hebrew Scripture: (from Psalm 62, adapted)

For God alone, our souls in silence wait.
 We wait for You, O God, in our worship;
 We wait upon You in our work.
 For God alone, our souls in silence wait.
 Give us the patience to be quiet and listen for Your word;
 Give us patience to be diligent and to labor according to Your will.
 For God alone, our souls in silence wait.

Epistle Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5.12-22

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Meditation: *The Edge of Silence*

Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

I don't know about you, but I find myself intimidated by the goal of prayer-filled life. It seems to call for us to rise every morning with God's name on our lips—and not let it leave our lips all the day long. With work, home, garden, friends and family and all the myriad commitments of living, how does one do that?

A prayer-filled life. There is no argument that it is a model to be striven for. People of faith in every age claim the power of prayer; the gift of prayer; and the responsibility of prayer for God's people. It's just that, while Scripture offers a few model prayers, (most notably the psalms, and the Lord's Prayer), there is no clear measure of what prayer is and whether we're doing it "right," whatever that means.

Those of us shaped in age of science and information want to know how it works, wanting prayer in a Petrie dish, adding a few tears or a little rage and a dash of wheedling, to see what kind of results we can get.

Still others of us are influenced by how Scripture's authors wrote of their experiences wait for a deep voice booming out across desert sands with clear instructions for life. Disappointed that

we don't hear voices (while I might note that if we did, most of us would go running for a mental health professional), we struggle with the questions, "When is an answer our own conclusion, and when is it God's response."

In an age of twelve-step programs and one-minute-managers, we cast about for a to-the-point manual on prayer. I confess to looking for one this week on the topic of "Preaching About Prayer."

A prayer-filled life. The words paint a picture of someone strolling along, lost in the clouds of heaven, a peaceful smile on their lips, while all the troubles of life rain down around them, either not quite touching them, or rolling off their prayer-protected shoulders. Yet, do we know anyone like that? or even close? And if we do, do we really have any desire to be someone whose life is so prayer-filled that there is no room for life?

If not, what other image can we offer and aspire to as representative of a prayer-filled life? I offer a few of my own reflections and models, not as prescription, but as invitation to share with me and one another your own prayer experiences, struggles and reflections. There are three people who, for me, suggest alternate images of the prayer-filled life. In part because if you ask them how they do it, their answer is the succinct word, "prayer." To know them is to know that is for them no glib easy answer. None are perfect, only one is a "church professional," they have their charms and irritating habits. Very different, they have one thing in common. They all have a regular discipline of prayer and reflection as a part of their daily lives.

The first was a woman who was 82 years old the day I met her. At 82, she was doing a new thing -- beginning Stephen Ministry training. She had known loss and grief, wrestled with relationships with her children and was then struggling with physical limitations of age and failing health. She made neither pretense nor show of those events, but lived in the calm assurance that God was with her in all those things. She was also growing, excited to be alive and lived with the sense of responsibility, that as long as she was alive, God was not done with her yet. Her presence was a balm to wounded souls, and I learned more from her than she ever learned from me.

Then there was my grandmother, my father's mother. She and I didn't get along very well—family rumor has it that's because we were far too much alike, but I did respect her. A minister's daughter, she raised three children alone during the Depression, was one of the first female trustees in the denomination at a time before most churches had deaconesses, and was a faithful, active participant in the life of her congregation until the day of her death in 1986. In 1992, I received a letter from a woman I have never met who was a member of that congregation. She had read in some denominational publication or another of my ordination. She wrote to tell me that the previous Sunday, that congregation had offered up a prayer of thanksgiving that they knew my grandmother would have made had she lived to see the day. I wish that in her lifetime, I had gotten to know better the woman whose faith and life had that kind of impact on other people.

I have a pastor-preacher friend who is one of the most faithful people and effective pastors I know. While he continues to be a model for me in many ways, he has one particular practice that has enlightened my own faith journey. He keeps a notebook, and occasionally will pull it out to jot something down—a line from a movie, something he sees on the street or reads, just a comment made in conversation. Eventually his notes will make an appearance as a sermon illustration. I thought that was a great technique so I borrowed it. And for several years—it was just that—a technique—until I began a more active struggle with my own discipline of

prayer. It was then I began to discover what he already knew. It is not sermon illustrations that pop up in life, but it is God who reveals God's-self again and again, in the minutia of daily living, if we have but the wit and wisdom to see.

Role models and prayer struggles led me to a new image of what it means to live a prayer-filled life. A prayer-filled life is not one which is so filled by the ritual of prayer that it pushes everything else out. A prayer-filled life is one gifted by the discovery that all of life is filled with and by the presence of God. A prayer-filled life is one that moves us from worshipping the unknown god of the Athenians to being awake to the presence of the One in Whom we live and move and have our being.

A prayer-filled life is not one which produces someone who walks through life untouched by it. A prayer-filled life produces the one who laughs and cries; kneels down to kiss a skinned knee, or lift a fallen colleague; who dares to welcome the one who scares them just a little; who fails dreadfully, and succeeds vastly; who loves greatly and gets passionately angry; who does the things that are easy and has the courage to visit the dying friend; and on some days doesn't; who is too proud to ask for help and humble enough to do it anyway. The one who lives a prayer-filled life is fully engaged in life and sees God in every minute of it.

A prayer-filled life. No two ways about it—to get from where we are to where we might yet be requires discipline, commitment and hard work. Our study, our reading, our conversations together around the questions of “how?” “How often?” “How do we know?” “To what effect?”—questions to which none of us hold the answers but our own experience—can provide the intellectual preparation. Our individual and shared visions of the possibilities of such a life can give us the heart to do the work. May the Spirit of God give us the will to enter more fully into a relationship with the One in whom we indeed, live and move and have our being.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate and merciful God: We come before you a humble and faithful people, bowing heads and souls in prayer that the power of your spirit might wash over us and run through us.

In the silence of these moments, we dare to raise to you the truest of our desires, that in your wisdom and discernment you might give us what we need for faithful living in our homes, in our church in our community, in our nation and on our planet.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.**

Give us this day, our daily bread.

**Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,**

but deliver us from evil,

**for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever Amen**