

“How to pray without words”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Today, I want to talk to you about one of the hardest challenges a marriage will ever face. No, I’m not talking about communication, or fidelity, or work-life balance. I’m talking about that age-old question: who will be the one to pray before dinner? It’s a question my own parents faced. They felt a prayer should be said, but neither wanted to be the one to do it. So, they came up with a solution. They had a child. Now, I’m not saying that their prayer desperation was the only reason I was conceived, but I do know that the moment I could speak in coherent sentences, my mom and dad happily bestowed upon me the official duty of saying the meal-time prayer.

There was just one problem. What do you think happens when you give a five year old a captive audience and a microphone?

My parents had to listen as I prayed for every animal. I’m not just talking about dogs and cats, squirrels and rabbits. I’m talking about lions, and cheetahs, and giraffes, and zebras, and scarlet macaws, and ring-tailed lemurs, and grasshoppers, and fireflies, and guinea pigs, and ocelots, and... well... you get the idea.

My parents could have saved a lot of time, and a lot of cold meals, if they had only sucked it up and prayed.

But we fear praying. Especially in public. All someone has to do is mention prayer, even in a church meeting, and suddenly all eyes dart to the floor, praying—ironically—that they’ll be spared.

It’s not just that we don’t have the words or are shy. It’s that we don’t know what to ask for. There are longings, fears, hurts, needs that go too deep and are too complex. So we turn to boring, unsatisfying surface-level prayers—divine shopping lists, a monologue of talking *at* God.

As the apostle Paul says, “We do not know how to pray as we ought.”

Prayer, as it ought to be, is Jesus weeping in the Garden of Gethsemane and begging God to take this cup from him. It is Hannah demanding to be remembered in her struggle with infertility. It is Moses meeting God in the burning bush. It is Mary’s Magnificat!

Such prayer is an invitation into the very presence of God. It is intimacy with our own souls, with those for whom we pray, and with the Lord. It is wonder and rejoicing and renewal. It is the catharsis of grief and pain handed over. It is the doorway to discovering the answers to life’s hardest questions. It is exactly what each of us longs for.

If that intimidating description of prayer just makes you feel even less confident in your capacity to find the right words or feelings or ideas, take comfort. Because such prayer doesn't begin or end with words. You in fact don't have to say a thing.

Paul promises the help of the Holy Spirit, whom he says "intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." Paul goes on to describe an intimate bond between us and God, through Christ—a bond so personal, so strong, that nothing in this world or in us can break it.

This prayerful bond is not a monologue; it is a dialogue. And you do not need to start the play; you need only to be in your seat, ready to hear.

Thomas Merton once wrote, "Prayer is then not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart—it is the orientation of our whole body, mind, and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration."

Such prayer is less spoken and more heard.

Of course, being silent and listening can be just as difficult as finding the right words. Fortunately, God has placed in our lives, just as Paul promised, sources of help. We can listen by reading Scripture, by attending to the people or events in our lives, by keeping a journal, by worshiping, by volunteering... or by finding God in nature.

For nearly five years, once every month on a Saturday morning in Louisville, I wiped the sleep from my eyes, grabbed my hiking gear, and met up with a small group of people hungry for God's voice. Crushed by the noise of work and life and by the chatter of our minds, we went to the woods to see if we could find there some sanctuary, built of oak and pond and bird song. Beginning with a devotional—perhaps a Mary Oliver poem or some piece of Scripture—we walked in silence, doing our best to listen. To listen not only to the crunch of leaves beneath our boots or to the low hum of the frogs, but also to some needed word—a buried word that might heal or unsettle or even, perhaps, commission.

Every time, I felt a rare buoyancy come over me, like a door being opened and a burden lifted.

Friendships were formed, vulnerabilities were shared, and people generally left with a smile on their face. One woman walked in prayer for her son and his struggle with addiction. Another was grieving the death of his brother. Most of us were just glad for the fresh air and good earth.

Somehow, God always found us there in the woods.

Westminster will now be offering these same contemplative hikes every month as a way to help prompt our prayer lives.

I want to challenge you to pray daily. You don't need to come with words, or wisdom, or training. You just need to come with open ears, ready to hear God's prayer for you.

To quote poet Wendell Berry, “Best of any song is bird song in the quiet, but first you must have the quiet.” The same is true for God’s song. **Amen.**