
— HEARING GOD —

Centering Prayer



By Joan Maxwell

When I was a child, I was taught that prayer was something humans said to God. God was a lot like Santa Claus. The basic idea was that if you asked, God would sometimes give you what you asked for. After I grew up, I was exposed to the idea that one could try to develop a relationship with God by listening to God rather than telling God what to do. I learned there are many ways we can open our hearts to the Mystery that we call God. One such is called centering prayer. In centering prayer you begin your prayer time by taking a comfortable, open position in a quiet place and deciding to commit a certain amount of time – say, 20 minutes – to prayer.

In your heart you state your intent to consent to God’s presence and action in your life. (It is said that the only thing we can give God is our intent. Anything more than intent is a gift from God.) Then you sit in silence, listening to whatever is given to you in your prayer.

Because we are humans, we are completely unable to keep our minds and hearts on this listening for very long. Again and again we will have a distracting thought that pulls us away from our intent. We need a way to come back from that thought to our simple intent. And centering prayer offers such a way, by asking us to pick a single word that symbolizes our intent. So while you sit in silence, as you breathe in you say in your heart the word you have chosen – “God,” perhaps – and every time you breathe out you say that same word – “God” -- in your heart. Repeating this word with each breath helps bring you back to your intent. After 20 minutes you end the prayer by saying the Lord’s Prayer.

If you’d like to try this form of prayer, it can be helpful to experience it in a group. A group practices centering prayer at St. John’s every Wednesday at 5:30 in the Chapel of the Carpenter. We begin with a contemplative Eucharist – a stripped-down form of Holy Eucharist without a sermon, just a Gospel reading and the Eucharistic service. Then we spend 20 minutes together in silence. And there’s always someone present who can help you review how it’s done. It’s helpful to know there’s no wrong way to do this prayer. So if this sounds interesting to you, come check it out! For further information, contact Joan Maxwell at 202-363-1388.