

Sweet Hours of Prayer

BY RUTH HALEY BARTON

Fixed-hour prayer anchors our daily lives in rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and silence, ensuring that we do not get too far into any day without reorienting ourselves to the presence of God. Praying at least some of the fixed-hours in community can shape our identity as communities of believers.

The first time I participated in fixed-hour prayer, I felt like I had come home to a place that I had never been and yet a place in which I truly belonged. It was a simple evening prayer service signaling the beginning of a spiritual retreat with a few likeminded souls. One of the members of our group had experience with fixed-hour prayer and so he prepared a simple liturgy using prayers from the Psalms, a reading from the Gospels, and written prayers from *The Book of Common Prayer* and *The United Methodist Hymnal*. We set aside a simple prayer space. We entered that space in silence. We lit a candle to signify Christ's presence with us through the Holy Spirit. And then we prayed the prayers provided for us beginning with these words:

From the rising of the sun to its setting,
let the name of the Lord be praised.

You, O Lord, are my Lamp.

My God, you make my darkness bright.

Light and peace in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Some of the prayers were read in unison, some were read responsively—and I just lost myself in the beauty and simplicity of it all. Instead of having to think really, really hard about what to pray, I gave myself to the beauty of words that expressed deep longings and powerful praises that

were true in me but I could never have found the words to say. Instead of getting caught up in the ego's attempts to say something profound to God (and to the people around me!), I actually rested from all of that and *prayed*. Instead of listening to someone else's interpretation or application of Scripture, I heard Scripture read without comment and listened for what God was saying to me in the context of our relationship. Instead of having to endure culturally relevant programming, this small group of us settled into a silence that was so rich and satisfying that I lost all track of time until someone finally nudged me to remind me that it was my turn to read Scripture! That was ten years ago and I have been praying that way ever since.

FIXED-HOUR PRAYER

This affinity for fixed-hour prayer came as a surprise. I had been raised in a Christian home and up to this point I had been highly suspicious of what those in my evangelical tradition would have called "rote prayers" — written prayers that we all feared would foster the vain repetitions that Jesus warned about. I was convinced that spontaneous prayers were the only real prayers because they came from the heart; only people who were not very spiritual and did not have much to say to God needed to rely on prayers that were written by someone else! But I have discovered that there is another option and that is to allow the words of the great prayers of the Church to engage my heart and to really mean them! Many Protestant traditions departed from fixed-hour prayer in "protest" of the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church and the spiritual numbness that the Reformers were trying to distance themselves from. But it turns out that in this distancing we actually lost a rich avenue of prayer that is rooted in Scripture and in our own tradition.

Variouly called "fixed-hour prayer," the "daily office," or "the Divine hours," these prayers are deeply biblical, expressing great spiritual truth and deep human longing in stirring language that has the potential to shape the soul. The Psalms, the Old and New Testament prayers (called Canticles), and the Lord's Prayer all express the universal human experience of the human soul reaching out to God. There is no better way to *learn* to pray and to actually pray!

Fixed-hour prayer has now become one of the richest aspects of my spiritual life. While I am not suggesting that we do away with spontaneous prayers — a very important aspect of the spiritual life — there are powerful benefits to fixed-hour prayer as well. For one thing, it relieves me of the need to figure out what to say, which can be completely exhausting at times. It seems that the farther along one gets in the spiritual life, the harder it is to articulate the longings that roil beneath the surface of our lives, the intimacies of our life with God, the questions and disillusionments that leave us speechless. When our own words fail us, the well-chosen words of Scripture or the prayers from the old prayer books help us to express the inexpress-

ible in deeply satisfying ways and open us to encounter with God. During moments when we might not even know how to approach God, fixed-hour prayer shows us the way.

Fixed-hour prayer also gives us a way to anchor our daily lives in rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and silence, ensuring that we do not get too far into any day without orienting or reorienting ourselves to the presence of God in our lives. "Living within the sweet caresses of the hours of prayer," Scot McKnight observes, "is the simplest and easiest way to consecrate our entire day as service to God."¹ Praying at least some of the fixed-hours in community can anchor and shape our identity as communities of believers.

HOURS OF POWER

As the little group I mentioned earlier continued to meet for prayer and planning regarding a new ministry that was emerging among us, we kept praying the hours together and have continued to this day. Whether we are on retreat together, working together, or even getting together socially, our steadiest commitment is to regularly turn our hearts toward God in prayer in ways that are appropriate to whatever part of the day we are in.²

In the morning, we begin with praise, affirming God's presence with us and his loving care toward us, and committing the work of the day to him.

O God, open our lips and we shall declare your praise.

God said: Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. This very day the Lord has acted!

Let us rejoice!

Praise the Lord!

God's name be praised!

At mid-day, when tasks and to-do lists are pressing in and human effort is at its height, we stop to renew our awareness of God's presence, to rest in him for a few moments and ask for his peace and guidance regarding those things that are concerning us. The opening prayer, or invocation, is always our heart cry:

O God, make speed to save us.

O Lord, make haste to help us.

In the evening, we acknowledge the light that comes from God as the sun sets. We place the cares of the day in God's hand and make the transition from day to evening.

We praise you and thank you, O God,

for you are without beginning and without end.

Through Christ, you created the whole world;

through Christ, preserve it.

Through Christ you made the day for the works of light
and the night for the refreshment of our minds and our bodies.
Keep us now in Christ, grant us a peaceful evening,
a night free from sin, and bring us at last to eternal life.
Through Christ and in the Holy Spirit,
We offer you all glory, honor, and worship,
now and forever. **Amen.**

Later on in evening prayer, we offer up general intercessions for ourselves and others as well as bringing our own specific needs and the burdens we are carrying for others. We are purposely not very wordy in our intercessions because we realize that this is another place in the spiritual life where human striving and fixing can so easily take over. As our own spiritual journey leads us to a greater capacity to be with God with what is true about us, to rest there and let him be in charge of what happens or what does not happen, so we are able to be with others and their needs quietly in God's presence as well.

Written intercessions allow us to join together in lifting up our shared concerns to God and then agree together in prayer by saying in unison,

In peace, let us pray to the Lord.
Lord have mercy.

This kind of prayer relieves us of the burden of thinking that we need to know what someone else needs in order to pray for them. It saves us from trying to tell God what we think the answer is or wrestle some result from him. We recognize that we do not know how to pray for ourselves or anyone else, for that matter, but the Holy Spirit knows. Since we understand that the Holy Spirit is already interceding for us before the throne of grace, we can bring a name or a need, express it simply, and in the silence experience our own groaning and the Holy Spirit's groaning for that person. In this way we are able to stop struggling so much to put things into words and just enter into God's caring love for that person, waiting with them and for them in God's presence. This is a wonderful way to release our burdens to God at the end of the working day.

When we are together on retreat, we close the day with night prayer, confessing our sins, celebrating God's presence among us during the day, and asking him to be with us as we rest.

May God grant us a quiet night and peace at the last.
Amen.

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praise to your name, O Most High;
to herald your love in the morning,
your truth at the close of the day.

Since the prayers are written there is nothing for any of us to figure out. Scriptures are taken from the lectionary – a reading schedule that follows the Christian calendar – and are read without comment, giving God the opportunity to address us directly through his word in whatever moment we are in. The Gospel readings in particular help us to stay connected to the person of Christ as the model for our life and work. In this way, we give the spirit of Christ access to us throughout the day. We have been amazed at the way in which the prayers and the Scriptures give us perspective, assurance, and guidance as we have needed it, in ways that could not have been orchestrated by human planning.

Although many of us seek to pray the hours when we are alone as well, we have discovered there is a special power that is released when two or three (or more!) gather around the presence of Christ and find ways to open their hearts to him together.

No matter how alone we might feel on any given day, fixed-hour prayer gives all of us a way to pray with the Church even when we are not in a church. When we engage in fixed-hour prayer we are praying prayers that the Church has written down and prayed for centuries; we join with millions of Christians around the world to say the same thing at the same time. Or, as Phyllis Tickle puts it, “When one prays the hours, one is using the exact words, phrases, and petitions that informed our faith for centuries.... we are using the exact words, phrases, and petitions that were offered just an hour earlier by our fellow Christians in the prior time zone, and that, in an hour will be picked up and offered again in the next time zone. The result is a constant cascade before the throne of God of the ‘unceasing prayer’ to which St. Paul urges us.”³

This way of praying affirms that we are not alone, that we are part of a much larger reality – the communion of saints that came before us, those who are alive on the planet now, and all who will come after us. In a spiritual sense, praying with the Church through fixed-hour prayer expresses that deeper unity that transcends all our divisions – and that is no small thing.

A DEEPLY ROOTED PRACTICE

I am not alone in my experience of discovering this very old and yet very new way of praying. The practice of ordering our activities around prayer at regular times of the day is being rediscovered and enthusiastically embraced by many Christians today. For those who are unaccustomed to fixed-hour prayer, it is reassuring to know that this is a Christian practice that is rooted in Jewish tradition and in the patterns of the early Church. Indeed it is one of the oldest ways of praying – so old in fact that it is not even taught overtly in Scripture, it is merely assumed. As Scot McKnight points out in his book, *Praying with the Church*, it would have been nearly impossible for Jesus and his disciples to be practicing Jews in the first

century without participating in Jewish rhythms of prayer. In fact, the Psalms were the Hebrew prayer book and practicing Jews prayed from the Psalms daily, providing them with the opportunity to constantly recite those biblical passages that were central to their spirituality.⁴

David alludes to the practice of fixed-hour prayer when he says,

But I call upon God,
and the LORD will save me.
Evening and morning and at noon
I utter my complaint and moan,
and he will hear my voice.

Psalm 55:16-17

Daniel prayed three times a day in spite of the threat to his life if he did so (Daniel 6:10). Peter received his vision regarding Cornelius while he was saying mid-day prayers (Acts 10:9). And the first healing miracle after the Ascension took place as Peter and John were on their way to three o'clock prayers in the Temple (Acts 3:1). So whenever we pray from the Psalms, we are using the same prayer book as Jesus and his disciples.

The elements of fixed-hour prayer contain a combination of some or all the following elements: an invocation inviting God's presence, a psalm or a prayer taken directly from the Psalms, a scripture reading, the Lord's Prayer, a creed that gives us the opportunity to affirm our faith, a collect or some other prayer of the

church, time for silent reflection, perhaps a hymn, and a benediction or a parting blessing. In many cases, these elements are nuanced to help us turn our hearts toward God in the specific context of the hour being prayed – lauds (morning), mid-day, vespers (evening), and compline (prayer before retiring). It is no wonder these prayers are powerful – they are the spiritual equivalent of a vitamin-packed power drink!

Today, there are many wonderful resources to help us reclaim this particular gift of the Christian tradition. Phyllis Tickle has produced a three-volume prayer book entitled *The Divine Hours* that is a liturgical reworking of the sixth-century Benedictine Rule of fixed-hour prayer.⁵ In fact, as I write this article during the season of Lent, I have been using *Eastertide: Prayers for*

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Lent through Easter (taken from *The Divine Hours*) as part of my Lenten discipline for praying through this important season of the Church year. While I cannot pray all four of the hours each day (morning, mid-day, evening, and night), my commitment has been to pray at least one or two of the fixed-hours and that has been a tremendous blessing.

There are two other prayer books I have found to be very useful at different times. One is *Hour by Hour*, an Anglican prayer book based solely on Scripture and *The Book of Common Prayer*.⁶ The other is *The Little Book of Hours*, a prayer book that has emerged out of the shared life of the Community of Jesus, an ecumenical Christian community in the Benedictine tradition.⁷ Both are very slim volumes that are easy to travel with and share with others.

Whatever resources one uses, my recommendation would be to just try it for there is nothing to lose and much to gain. Fixed-hour prayer is a powerful practice for engaging the mind, the heart, the soul, and the body in a rhythm of speaking, listening, and communing which is at the heart of our relationship with God. It is a powerful way of "attending to the eternal timelessness and magnificence of the divine life"⁸ in the midst of the hustle and bustle of daily life. And God knows we need a way to do that!

NOTES

1 Scot McKnight, *Praying with the Church: Following Jesus Daily, Hourly, Today* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 39.

2 I am indebted to my colleague, Joe Sherman, for his guidance in developing the liturgies we use in The Transforming Center.

3 Phyllis Tickle, *Eastertide: Prayers for Lent through Easter from the Divine Hours* (New York: Random House, 2004), xi-xii.

4 McKnight, *Praying with the Church*, 31.

5 Phyllis Tickle, *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Springtime* (2001), *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Summertime* (2000), and *Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (2000) were the original versions from Doubleday. Additional versions for travel or for use with children are currently available.

6 Edward S. Gleason, *Hour by Hour* (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement Publications, 2003).

7 The Community of Jesus, *The Little Book of Hours*, revised edition (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007).

8 Tickle, *Eastertide*, x.



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