



THE HEART OF THE WORLD:

Spiritual Formation, Compassionate Action



By Katie Harmon-McLaughlin,
Spiritual Formation Ministries

Prayer does not blind us to the world, but it transforms our vision of the world, and makes us see it, all [people], and all the history of [humanity], in the light of God.

—Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 112

I have heard many who are concerned about the state of the world repeating some variation of “no more thoughts and prayers.” The impulse behind this phrase comes from frustration that “prayer” is being used as a way to avoid the real work of difficult conversations and meaningful change amid urgent injustices throughout our global family.

I, too, reject the idea that simply sending “thoughts and prayers” can be a substitute for faithful response. This actually perverts the purpose of prayer. When we authentically come to prayer, which is about relationship with the Living God, we continuously are transformed.

This is why I believe that rather than discarding the notion of prayer amid challenging global issues, a call to deeper prayer is needed as the source of transformative action.

Growing deeper in relationship with God, we are not removed from the world’s concerns; we enter their heart. In prayer, a deeper invitation beckons beneath my reactions and impulses. A wider perspective calls for my attention. Integrity of faith and discipleship seeks to live through my whole-life response.

Entering prayer, I wake up to life—my own and all the lives around me. My vision expands beyond my immediate concerns to the squirrel scurrying up the tree, the mourning dove’s haunting coo to my neighbors as they walk down the sidewalk, and—gradually as my heart opens wider—to the whole, suffering, beautiful, sacred world.

The quality of my prayer time varies—distracted, restless, present, grateful, questioning—but several important things happen in me over time when I consistently turn my attention to God in all things. Commitment to prayer cultivates awareness and readiness for compassionate action.

I remember that I am not in control.

Morning works best for me. It is a threshold to a new day. I watch the sunrise. There is some humble relief in knowing that while I have the power to contribute good in the world, I don't make the sun rise. I don't set the planet in motion. I don't make the trees grow. I don't coordinate the songbirds meeting in the branches.

I exhale all my striving for a moment to rest in the heart of the One who is the Source of us all. This helps me get honest about my own agendas, which might be crowding out space to listen more deeply to God's vision of shalom for all creation.

I remember that I belong.

It is as simple as breathing—remembering that my life is a gift, and I depend on the gifts of this planet for my existence. Prayer is an experience of union with God and all creation. When I listen for God deep within, I discover the pulsing heart of the world God loves. I rest into a deep belonging that comforts and disturbs. In the welfare of every person I encounter resides my own welfare. To know God deeper is to know deeper our connection with all life.

The more we journey toward the Center the closer we are both to God and to each other...this journey into God and the profound meeting of others in the inner ground of silence is a single movement.

**It is a peace
that frees me
to relate and
act in ways that
are counter to
many of the
destructive
attitudes and
trends so
common today.**

I dare to encounter what is real.

Whether prayers are expressed in words or silence, they ask us to see what is real in ourselves and the world around us. Walter Burghardt describes contemplative prayer as, “a long, loving look at the real.” In prayer, I examine my motivations, habits, and priorities. I listen into thoughts and feelings in the presence of God. I strengthen my tolerance for bearing hard realities as I trust in the wisdom of listening to what I otherwise might choose to avoid.

In prayer, everything we experience is for healing and wholeness. A pang of sadness, a cry of the heart, an honest reflection, a deep longing, a sense of peace—all of it contains the Spirit’s invitations to grow and transform. As I am formed in the practice of sitting with what is most real in me, I am better able to sit with what is most real in the world around me—to be present to what is hard and what brings delight.

I am formed as a disciple of Christ.

Spiritual formation is the intentional process of being formed by God in the likeness of Christ. In prayer, I consider all the things in my life that might be forming me into something else (political, economic, cultural) and I choose instead to be formed as a disciple. It is a process of whole-life integration that leads naturally to greater wholeness and integrity in daily living. Are my thoughts and actions throughout the day grounded in my relationship with God and calling to “embody and live the concerns and passion of Christ”? (Doctrine and Covenants 164:9d).

Author Gerald May speaks to the importance of grounding our whole selves in the Spirit as we engage the work of co-creating a better world:

One move for justice creates another injustice elsewhere; peace is bought in one place by fighting in another; revolution frees the oppressed, and they become oppressors; the hungry are fed and charged with the price of their dignity, the ill are cured but not healed. When getting the job done is all that matters, the job that gets done creates more jobs that need doing. Still the heart yearns, in simple silent pleading for action that does not mimic love but springs forth from it...Christians try to imitate Jesus’ actions and follow the letter of the parables without attending to where Jesus’ heart was turned at the time.

—Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart*, pp. 234–235

I develop courage to respond in daily life.

Grounding our lives in God, we become more willing to respond in the moment-to-moment encounters through discipleship. This could be

expressed in many ways—acting courageously for justice, listening deeply to someone in distress, or seeing the sacredness of difficult-to-love people instead of gossiping about them.

Everyday acts of mercy and kindness are important currency in times of struggle and chaos. Speaking up for the oppressed, writing a letter to a politician, or making responsible choices can be fruit from a life of deep prayer. Authentic prayer always leads to transformation in the ways we live. President Stephen M. Veazey, in a 2005 World Conference sermon, expressed what happens to us as we ground our lives in God as the source of our action in daily life:

As I am becoming increasingly rooted and grounded in Christ, I am finding, at the center of my being, peace—abiding peace—that passes understanding. This peace is not a passive peace. It is a peace that frees me to relate and act in ways that are counter to many of the destructive attitudes and trends so common today. It is an all-encompassing peace that assures me that in life or death I belong to Christ. Therefore, I do not need to be afraid.

—Stephen M. Veazey, “Share the Peace of Jesus Christ”

I awaken to God everywhere.

It is important to remember that prayer is about relationship with God. It is not what we do so we can get to the real work. Prayer is where we discover that God is our real work, and we gradually awaken to God’s presence in the core of our being and in the heart of the world. Everywhere we go, God is already present. Seeing everyone and everything through this lens requires discipline, practice, and grace.

I find that the more I make prayer part of my normal rhythm, the more I long for it. I notice the difference in my quality of presence throughout the day when I don’t make time for this vital relationship with God to be the center of my life. The more I am steeped in a God-view of things, the more I am willing to risk for the sake of another, the bolder I feel about living my deepest values informed by discipleship, and the more integrity I have in my daily choices and interactions.

May we have the courage to pray deeply and act deeply so that all our responses may be redemptive, and the vision of the world we seek will be made real.

