

"Do you need a place to pray?"

By [Jonathan Melton](#)

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Toward the end of last semester, a student walked through the door at St. Francis House, the campus ministry I serve, and abruptly stopped, standing inside the entryway. Frozen. I was passing through the space, which connects the chapel and the lounge, and stopped to introduce myself. "What brings you in today?" I asked him.

His answer expected the question. "I'm not sure why I'm here. My parents are only nominally people of faith. I wasn't raised in it. I don't practice it. Maybe I shouldn't—I don't know why I'm here." He looked up at me.

I considered his answer. Plenty of students come to the Episcopal Center in a given day, for lots of reasons. In an average week, some 40 to 50 young people will come by and stay a while for something other than weekly worship. Most will study. Some will spend time on a piano. Others will sneak in a nap before class. The space at SFH hosts a university AA group and another student group that feeds the food insecure in the kitchen downstairs. Plenty of reasons to be here, such that even this student's insecurity set him apart: he was wrestling with *faith*. He identified SFH not first as a best-kept-secret place of study, but primarily as a place of faith, an identification that both brought him in the door and made him wonder why he did. I asked him, "Do you need a place to pray?" The young man nodded, and I walked him to the chapel.

At St. Francis House, we try to keep an open space with a no-strings hospitality. You bring yourself, I'll be myself. Come as the Spirit leads and as you find life. No agendas or commitments required in exchange for hot tea. Just the privilege of welcoming a stranger or listening for God with a friend.

No strings means that I do not insist on talking about God with everyone who comes through our doors, but no strings cannot lead me to ignore the possibility. After all, even the student coming to SFH in search of a coffee spot has knowingly chosen a coffee spot with a free-standing chapel, regularly hosted by a priest.

"Do you need a place to pray?"

Several times in the past year, I have encountered Christian leaders, lay and ordained, who have emphasized the non-necessity of regular prayer in the lives of faithful Christians. These leaders have encouraged Christians not to beat themselves up over the absence of a prayer life. Sometimes implied, either directly or indirectly, is the notion that the piety accompanying regular rhythms of prayer is a) not authentic or b) rooted in self-righteous score-keeping.

I want to add my loudest "Amen!" to the voices that would oppose beating up anyone for the state of their prayer life, but equally to suggest that there may be a reason the person who has been so accosted by the shame-wielders of the faith is still within shouting distance to hear the "Amen!" at all. And that reason likely isn't to be told that prayer need not be a possibility or living aspiration for her life. God is moving in the lives of those we meet.

Increasingly, I fear that the reluctance of Christian leaders to open one another and others to prayer has roots in our own estimation of prayer's value. Many folks believe that, if prayer is worth doing, it is because prayer makes our daily work "better," but faint is the expectation and hope that our daily work would grow our ability to pray. Unfathomably, the suggestion that one's work can become (or double as) one's prayer in the absence of times set aside for prayer has become so popular that it no longer holds the place of well-timed pastoral comfort to the overwhelmed; it is increasingly the normative teaching on prayer. Ironically, such a teaching has no tools for interpreting the lives of Christianity's most remarkable social activists, like Simone Weil and Dorothy Day, both of whom cited surprising rhythms of daily, traditional prayer as essential to the sustainability of their work.

Of course, the pastoral suggestion that faithful Christians need not seek or keep regular rhythms of prayer did not come from nowhere. People of prayer have much for which to repent by our judgments of one another and others, not just *whether* the others are praying, but *how*. Enter all manner of liturgical squabble. Indeed, praying Christians through the years have been so harshly judged one another and others that it is now the non-prayers who can be tempted toward self-righteousness, assured in their critical rejection of the failings of the institutional church. Lord, have mercy.

I have no desire to pass judgment on Christians who do or do not keep daily rhythms of prayer. Instead, I hope to challenge the assumptions that lead some Christians to discourage others from exploring daily rhythms of prayer. Above all, I pray Christians can soften their judgements of one another such that we are not directing others from postures of defensiveness.

My Facebook feed reminded me that three years ago a handful of SFH students and I arrived on an evacuated cow pasture on the edge of the Badlands with 650 friends, strangers, and the brothers of Taizé at the invitation of the Lakota people. We spent four days together, learning the depths of the hurts and transgressions that have marked the relationship between the Lakota and the United States. We studied scripture together, camped in tent villages, shared porta potties, walked down a makeshift staircase, planted in the hill, three times a day, into the Badlands. To pray. Against the hum of an electric generator, we sang our songs and sought God in silence. At the end of the four days, Brother Emile met with the Midwest contingent and shared his prayer for next steps. He did not hope that we would all visit Taizé or start Taizé services in our local communities. He did not voice his hope that we would do in our hometowns what they had done on this scale. Instead, he asked if any lacked for home churches and if any of us prayed outside of our communities with others, daily. This was his prayer.

Engaging a) rhythms in one's own tradition and b) prayer with those outside it seems to me a hopeful beginning toward ending judgments and restoring trust in communities that pray.

I remember the time my good friend asked me to pray the Daily Office with him for a summer. My friend is an evangelical, without any resource like the Episcopal prayer book. He asked me to share my prayers with him. As we prayed that summer, he taught me the evangelical's heart for the intercessory prayer time, for which the prayer book allows but into which good Episcopalians know better than to speak. Neither of us imposed our wills. Both of us shared our hearts. We were both transformed into more than we were before the prayers that filled that summer.

I do think this is key: not telling one another how to pray, but committing to pray with each other. Not "I will show you how it works," but "I will pray with you," with vulnerability and openness to God and the new thing God would show us in the other, prayerful enactment of the baptismal covenant's conviction that Christ is there to be sought and served in each other.

I pray that all Christians never imagine themselves beyond the position to say, "And show me what God in Christ has shown you," without fear. Even of the life of prayer.

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