

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year B  
May 12, 2024  
Prayer in the 'Middle' Voice

Rebecca Miller, Licensed Lay Preacher  
Acts 1:15-17, 21-16; Psalm 1  
1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

*Do you have an answered prayer “hall of fame?” I think if we live long enough there will be certain locations on the timeline of our life that we can point to and say with conviction, “That right there? That was God. No doubt about it.”*

*One such time in my life - a sure contender for a position in my own “answered prayer hall of fame” - occurred on January 5th, 1989.*

*A year or so prior to that, I had grown tired of my little brothers and so I let my mom know that I'd really like a little SISTER now, please.*

*She chuckled to herself, having recently given birth to my second brother, secure in her knowledge that more children were NOT in the current plan. However, she did encourage me to let my request be known to God.*

*And I did.*

*Not only did \*I\* pray regularly for a sister in our nightly family devotions, I also managed to enlist the help of one of my brothers (the other one wasn't talking yet, so he was off the hook.)*

*This was no easy task, because when my brother heard my urgent campaign for a sister, HE immediately started praying for another BROTHER. I was dismayed at this course of action, concerned that our prayers would cancel out and we'd get nothing!*

*Eventually, he saw the error of his ways and began to do as his big sister commanded “uh, I mean “requested.” =)*

*After I straightened out that minor detail we BOTH prayed for a sister and God heard*

*and God said yes*

*and my only sister Lisa was born*

*and we were thrilled*

*and my parents were also thrilled, but even more tired, now with four kids ages six and under! I'm sure that was a catalyst for many additional prayers!*

*Comedian Lily Tomlin asks, “Why is it that when we speak to God, we are said to be praying... but when God speaks to us, we are said to be schizophrenic?”*

*We may laugh but she has a point! It does seem rather bizarre that the God of the universe would communicate with us on a personal level, doesn't it? Especially if you didn't grow up familiar with the concept of prayer. How does it even work? The Bible and history are full of examples, including the ones we find in our texts today.*

*Peter prays with the disciples and asks God to show them who should take the place of Judas. Then they essentially roll dice to determine God's will in the matter. The Psalm encourages diligent meditation on the law of God as a way to draw near to God and enjoy a prosperous life. And in the gospel we get to listen in as Jesus talks to his father in heaven about his heartfelt desires.*

*In describing prayer I sometimes use the analogy of a person you're always hearing about from other people, but haven't met them yourself yet. Let's use my sister Lisa as an example, since most of you haven't met her. I would tell you that I love to sing and make music with Lisa. She's a great piano player and has a beautiful voice. My daughters might tell you that they enjoy playing Scattergories with her, as well as riding their dirt bikes together. Her coworkers would tell you that they experience Lisa as detail-oriented, and that she plans amazing events at their workplace. Her friends might say that she is always up for a hike and is a great listener.*

*With each new piece of information about Lisa, your picture of who she is and what she's like is more complete but it's still missing your OWN personal experience. If you were to interact with Lisa you *\*could\** try and copy what any of the rest of us do. Ultimately though, it would feel forced. It wouldn't fit quite right, because those are the ways that WE interact with and relate to Lisa, not necessarily how you will. After you're introduced to Lisa, and that direct relationship with her is initiated, you'd find the way that works best for you to build your own connection with her.*

*It's like that with God and prayer. Everyone has unique and personal ways that they hear from and talk to God. In my experience, prayer doesn't work as well and isn't as satisfying when I try to learn about God by copying someone else's way. Maybe we start out by trying different forms of prayer, seeing what works better or doesn't work at all for us. Our persistence pays off as we eventually learn to hear God's voice, and enjoy the personal connection and reassurance of God's presence. It's then that prayer becomes personal in addition to corporate.*

*Over time we learn to recognize the voices of those we listen to, those who are in our lives regularly. This is true of God just as it is true with people. I immediately*

*know the voices of my daughters in a way that I will never know the voice of any particular Starbucks barista, for example.*

*In time, and with regular experimentation and practice, we learn to recognize God's voice and to distinguish it from the many other voices and noises that clamor for our attention.*

*Jesus expresses confidence in this level of personal connection with his followers when he says in John's gospel: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."*

*How did Jesus pray, what was his connection and interaction with God like? What can we learn from observing his patterns of prayer?*

*In the gospel reading Jesus prays to God in a way that is deeply personal. He reveals his deepest wishes for those he loves. He surrenders control. Jesus often would get up while it was still dark and go off by himself to pray in silence and solitude.*

*How do we know what he said? We can only assume he told someone about what it was like to be in relationship to God, just as I told you what it's like for me to be in relationship with my sister.*

*We can learn a lot about prayer by imitating Jesus.*

*However, I've tried to understand what Jesus meant in his prayers and I'm confused most of the time, especially in the gospel text today. I end up with more questions than answers. But isn't that how it is when we eavesdrop on conversations?*

*Especially if we only hear one side? We may get a rough idea, but the only people who really know what's going on are those in conversation.*

*Just like the best way to get to know my sister Lisa is directly with her. Not through me or anyone else.*

*What is prayer like for you?*

*In what ways do you meet God and how does God consistently show up in your life?*

*Let's explore and celebrate the ways you know and interact with the person of God.*

*As with any relationship there are periods of newness and discovery and times of comfortable, fulfilling routine.*

*Prayer is so much more than simple communication, though it is just that, at times.*

*Prayer is rich and complex as well as simple and straightforward.*

*Prayer is communication with God... that has the potential to become to communion with God... that has the potential to become union with God.*

*Mere communication is all about facts, exchange of necessary info, and statements of truth. It can occur between two people who are quite close as well as those who aren't terribly close, for example, work email or scheduling a doctor's appointment. Communication is useful and necessary but not always deeper than surface level. On the other hand, communion is reserved for deep knowing and sharing. It's a word to describe the interaction of close friends or even soulmates. Communion consists of thoughts, ideas, feelings, motivations, encouragement, and so much more.*

*As we progress along our spiritual journeys, our prayer lives will develop to encompass all three: communication, communion, and union. We begin to have the mind of Christ as we spend time with God. We will have eyes to see and ears to hear to join God at work in the spiritual realities around us. This intimate union with God isn't reserved for special occasions, or limited to only the extra holy people or those in official religious capacity. It's available to every one of us. Every member of the body of Christ can enjoy a rich and satisfying prayer life.*

*In his book "The Contemplative Pastor" Eugene Peterson says:*

*"The assumption of spirituality is that God always is doing something before I know it, so the task is not to get God to do something that \*I\* think needs to be done, but to become aware of what God is doing, so that I can respond to it, and participate, and take delight in it."*

*To better understand this idea of participating in what God is already doing I'm excited to share something I learned about Greek — the original language of the New Testament.*

*Jesus's prayers are written in what's called the "middle voice" in Greek.*

*We, as English speakers, are accustomed to viewing prayer through the lens of the active voice and/or the passive voice.*

*In the active voice I am the actor and I give advice. I tell God what I want and need. That's all very good. But it's not all there is to prayer.*

*In the passive voice I am being acted upon and I receive advice. I hear from God and receive wisdom and direction. Also Good. But there's more!*

*In the middle voice - I receive advice and direction, I also act, but the action doesn't start with me! I am joining the action of another, in this case, God's — "NOT my own initiated action.*

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year B  
May 12, 2024  
Prayer in the 'Middle' Voice

Rebecca Miller, Licensed Lay Preacher  
Acts 1:15-17, 21-16; Psalm 1  
1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

*God is the one already at work and I join God in that action through prayer.  
That is how Jesus prayed - in the middle voice.  
Prayer in this way allows us to join God in what God is already doing everywhere  
around us!*

*In his book, "Praying like Monks, Living like Fools" Tyler Staton says:  
"Prayer and spirituality feature participation — the complex participation of God  
and the human. His will and our wills. We do not abandon ourselves to the stream of  
grace and drown in the ocean of love, losing our identity. We do not pull strings that  
activate God's operations in our lives, subjecting God to our assertive identity. We  
neither manipulate God (active voice), nor are manipulated by God (passive voice),  
we are involved in the action and participate in its results but do not control or  
define it (middle voice.) Prayer takes place in the middle voice."*

*Through these prayers we have the honor of representing God to the world. How  
can the world know of God's unfailing love? We are the community of witnesses to  
God's loving character. Through joining God's ongoing action in prayer we love the  
people God loves. We love the world through our prayers. And when we do, we get a  
glimpse of God at work.*

*Next Sunday is Pentecost, when we celebrate the Holy Spirit coming in power and  
as an ever-present comforter and interceder on our behalf.*

*As we prepare for Pentecost and the joyful celebration of the powerful arrival of the  
Holy Spirit let's prepare our hearts to hear. Let's consider how we, both individually  
and collectively, are being prompted to join God's action that is already happening  
in the spiritual reality all around us.*

*How can we prepare ourselves to join in the work God is already doing in ourselves  
and in our community?*

*As we ponder the answer to this question I'll close with the words of the apostle Paul  
to the Christians in Corinth:*

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the communion of the Holy  
Spirit be with all of us.*

**AMEN**

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year B  
May 12, 2024  
Prayer in the 'Middle' Voice

Rebecca Miller, Licensed Lay Preacher  
Acts 1:15-17, 21-16; Psalm 1  
1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19