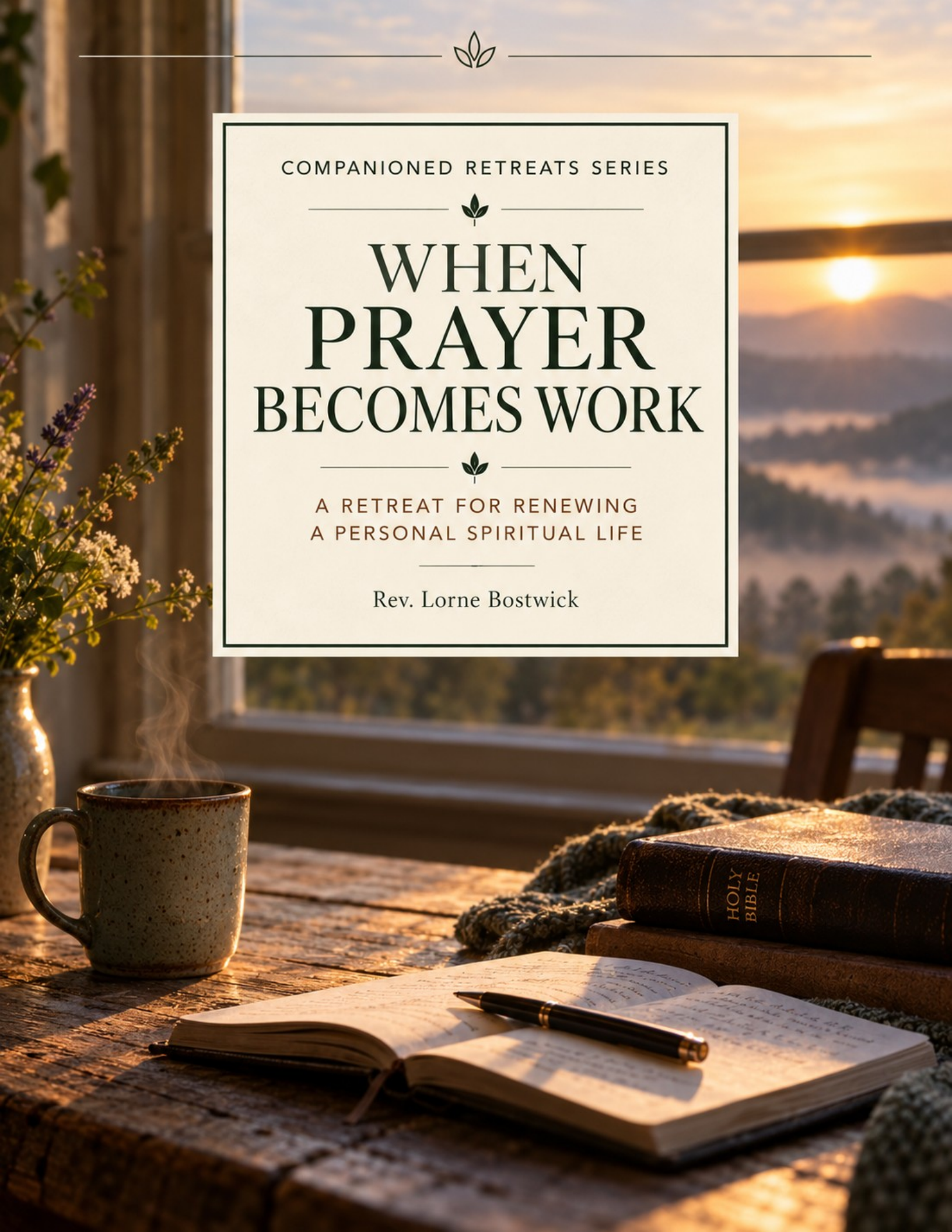

COMPANIONED RETREATS SERIES

WHEN PRAYER BECOMES WORK

A RETREAT FOR RENEWING
A PERSONAL SPIRITUAL LIFE

Rev. Lorne Bostwick

When Prayer Has Become Work

A Companioned Retreat for Renewing a Personal Spiritual Life

[Insert the approved Common Introduction here.]

When Prayer Has Become Work

You know how to pray.

You have prayed beside hospital beds and graves. You have prayed before meetings when everyone was already tense. You have prayed at weddings, baptisms, communion tables, dinner tables, and in sanctuaries full of people waiting for you to find the words.

You have written prayers.

Led prayers.

Taught prayer.

Invited other people to pray.

And sometimes, when everyone turns toward you and waits, you have prayed because it was your job to pray.

There is nothing wrong with any of that. Leading the prayers of God's people is one of the privileges of ministry.

But something can happen when prayer becomes part of your work.

The language becomes familiar. The instincts become practiced. You know how to gather the concerns of a congregation and give them voice. You know how to find words when other people cannot.

And somewhere beneath all that competence, your own prayer can become harder to find.

Perhaps you still pray often.

Perhaps you don't.

Perhaps prayer has become mostly words.

Perhaps silence feels empty.

Perhaps you begin praying and discover that you sound suspiciously like yourself on Sunday morning.

Or perhaps you are simply tired of trying to have a good prayer life.

This retreat is not about fixing that.

You are not coming here to become better at prayer.

For these days, no one needs you to lead.

No one needs an invocation.

No one is waiting for the right words.

You don't need to sound theological.

You don't even need words.

Prayer is the dialogue of a life lived in relationship with God.

Sometimes you listen.

Sometimes you speak.

Sometimes you receive.

Sometimes you respond.

But the dialogue can be larger than the moments you ordinarily call prayer.

Something catches your attention.

Beauty stops you.

A memory rises.

You feel joy.

Or sadness.

Hope.

Love.

Anger.

Faith.

Fear.

Trust.

Longing.

Compassion.

Something in you wants to create.

Something in you wants to resist what diminishes life.

Something in you wants to move toward what gives life.

You do not have to call every feeling, impulse, or inspiration the voice of God. You do not need to decide immediately where it came from.

Bring it into the relationship.

Notice it.

Attend to it.

Listen.

Respond.

See what enlarges love, awakens hope, deepens faithfulness, calls forth courage, gives life—and what does not.

Sometimes your response will be words.

Sometimes your hands will answer.

Sometimes prayer will be a candle burning in a dark room, fingers working clay, dishes becoming clean, a song received in silence, trash lifted from the roadside, bread broken, tears, laughter, beauty, resistance, rest.

The life you live can become dialogue.

For these days, **let prayer become a way of inhabiting the relationship.**

Before You Come

Bring Possibilities

This retreat has a longer list of things you might bring than most Companioned Retreats.

Don't bring everything.

Read the possibilities and notice what draws you.

Bring your Bible.

Then perhaps:

A candle or several candles and something to light them, if your retreat setting permits open flame.

Incense, if permitted, or another way of bringing fragrance into the space—a fragrance plug-in or warmer, reed diffuser, scented candle, flowers, cedar, herbs, or another scent that draws your attention.

A small cross, icon, sculpture, or other three-dimensional object that holds your attention.

A stone, shell, piece of wood, photograph, or something else that carries beauty, memory, or meaning.

Clay.

A sketchbook.

Blank paper.

Colored pencils.

Watercolors or paints.

A favorite pen.

An instrument, if you play one.

Music you would like to hear.

A hymnal or songbook.

A prayer book or collection of prayers from the Christian tradition.

Prayer beads, a rosary, or another tactile aid, if that belongs naturally to your tradition or curiosity.

Comfortable clothing that allows you to move freely.

Work gloves.

A trash bag.

Something simple to cook.

Perhaps bread to break.

You aren't packing equipment for a spiritual workshop.

You are bringing possibilities.

Leave plenty of room for what you did not plan.

Ways You Might Pray

A Palette, Not a Program

Spend a little time with these possibilities.

You are not supposed to try all of them.

You aren't even supposed to try most of them.

Some may already belong to your prayer life. Some may be unfamiliar. Some may not interest you at all.

One may draw you unexpectedly.

You may discover another that isn't listed here.

And if one form of prayer holds you for most of the retreat, remain there.

Prayer with Words

Speak to God conversationally.

Pray a Psalm.

Pray the Lord's Prayer.

Write a prayer.

Write a letter to God.

Pray one sentence repeatedly.

Name people before God.

Give thanks.

Confess.

Lament.

Complain.

Ask.

Bless.

Say nothing polished.

Say what is true.

Prayer Without Words

Sit silently.

Breathe.

Open your hands.

Kneel.

Stand.

Lie on the floor.

Look toward a window.

Light a candle.

Watch its flame.

Receive a fragrance.

Hold an object.

Listen.

Wait.

Rest in God's presence without trying to produce an experience.

Prayer with Scripture

Read a passage aloud.

Listen to someone else read it if communal worship is available.

Carry one sentence with you.

Answer a biblical question.

Enter imaginatively into a biblical scene.

Sing a Psalm.

Repeat one word.

Let a passage remain unanswered.

Read Scripture without preparing to explain it.

Prayer with Your Hands

Shape clay.

Draw.

Paint.

Knit.

Carve.

Build.

Cook.

Wash dishes.

Sweep.

Tend a garden.

Repair something.

Pick up trash.

Arrange flowers.

Make something beautiful.

Make something badly.

Let the doing become the response.

Prayer with Your Body

Walk.

Stretch.

Swim.

Bow.

Kneel.

Lift your hands.

Dance.

Breathe deeply.

Stand barefoot on the ground.

Feel sunlight or rain against your skin.

Let your body participate in a relationship that has never belonged only to your mind.

Prayer Through Beauty

Listen to music.

Sing.

Play an instrument.

Look at a painting.

Sit before an icon.

Watch sunlight move across a wall.

Notice architecture.

Look at a tree.

Watch water.

Receive beauty without needing to explain why it moves you.

Prayer Through Ordinary Life

Make coffee.

Prepare a meal.

Wash a plate.

Make the bed.

Sweep the floor.

Fold clothes.

Tend a fire.

Open a door for someone.

Care for a place.

Receive food someone else has prepared.

Ordinary things need not be disguised as something religious before they can become part of your life with God.

Prayer Received from Others

You don't always have to make your own prayer.

Borrow words.

The Psalms.

The Lord's Prayer.

A hymn.

An ancient prayer.

A liturgy.

A blessing.

The prayers of a monastery or retreat community.

Sometimes another person's words can carry you when your own cannot.

Keep this palette nearby for now.

Return to it when you want.

But don't become dependent on it.

As these days unfold, see whether you begin to notice prayer before you have chosen a way to pray.

The First Evening

You Don't Have to Lead Prayer Here

Arrive.

Settle into the place.

Then find the candle you brought.

If candles are permitted, light one.

If they aren't, place something else before you—a cross, sculpture, stone, icon, photograph, shell, or simply your own open hands.

Read Romans 8:26:

“We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

You don't have to know how to pray tonight.

That is already in Scripture.

Look at the candle or the object before you.

Notice what draws your attention.

The movement of the flame.

The shape of the object.

Its weight.

A memory.

A feeling.

A thought you weren't expecting.

Don't hurry to turn what you notice into a prayer.

Perhaps noticing is already part of the prayer.

Breathe.

If words come, let them come.

If they don't, don't manufacture them.

You are not responsible for getting this retreat started spiritually.

You are here.

God is here.

For tonight, that is enough.

Receive the Meal

Before your evening meal, pray in whatever way comes naturally.

Or don't begin with words.

Look at what has been placed before you.

Notice how many lives and how much earth are represented there: soil, rain, sun, seed, plant, animal, farmer, driver, cook, server, hands.

Something has been given.

Receive it.

Perhaps gratitude comes.

Perhaps the meal itself becomes gratitude.

Eat.

Afterward, Wash the Dishes

If there are dishes to wash, don't hurry through them.

Take one dirty plate or cup.

Put it into the water.

Wash away what remains from the meal.

Rinse it.

Dry it.

Make it ready to receive again.

You do not need to invent a metaphor.

Just notice the action.

Something that has received what gave you life is being cleansed so it can receive again without carrying what would spoil what comes next.

Wash another.

Perhaps something in the action speaks to you.

Perhaps you find yourself thinking about what you receive.

What you carry.

Cleansing.

Readiness.

Perhaps nothing comes at all.

Don't force meaning onto the dishes.

Let the action offer whatever it offers.

Then respond as you want.

A thought.

A word.

A memory.

A prayer.

Another washed dish.

Sometimes the response is the action itself.

Before Sleep

Borrow Someone Else's Prayer

Tonight, don't compose a bedtime prayer.

Borrow one.

Read Psalm 23 slowly.

Not as a text you might preach.

Not as something you need to understand.

Let someone else's words carry you.

“The LORD is my shepherd.”

“He makes me lie down.”

“He leads me beside still waters.”

“He restores my soul.”

If one phrase stays with you, let it.

You don't have to do anything with it.

When you have heard enough, stop.

Turn out the light.

Sleep can be part of the dialogue too.

The First Morning

Before Words

When you wake, don't begin with a prayer you know.

Open the curtains.

Step outside if you can.

Stand before the morning.

Receive what is there.

Cool air.

Heat.

Sun.

Clouds.

Fog.

Rain.

Birds.

Traffic in the distance.

Silence.

Whatever morning has come.

Read Psalm 143:8:

“Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust.”

Then listen.

Not only for words.

What catches your eye?

What sound keeps returning?

What are you feeling?

What are you remembering?

What hope or sadness is already awake with you?

You do not have to decide whether any of this is a message from God.

Let it enter the relationship.

Stay for a while.

Then let the morning continue.

Scripture Speaks

Later, read 1 Samuel 3:1–10.

You know the story.

For these days, you don't need to teach it.

Notice instead how long it takes Samuel to recognize what is happening.

A voice comes.

He misunderstands.

He gets up.

He goes to Eli.

It happens again.

And again.

Recognition takes time.

Finally comes the response:

“Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Use Samuel's words if you want:

Speak, for your servant is listening.

Then leave room for the other side of the dialogue.

Do not require an answer.

Do not require the answer to arrive as words.

Perhaps nothing becomes clear.

Perhaps something catches your attention later.

A memory returns.

Someone you love comes to mind.

A desire becomes harder to ignore.

Compassion rises.

Or perhaps you simply sit quietly.

Listening is still listening when nothing obvious is heard.

Prayer in Your Hands

Clay

Take the clay you brought.

If you didn't bring clay, use another material you can shape, draw, arrange, or work with.

Read Jeremiah 18:1–6.

Then put the Bible aside.

Take the clay into your hands.

Feel its weight.

Its coolness.

Its resistance.

Press into it.

Shape it.

Don't decide too quickly what it should become.

Pay attention to the conversation between your hands and the material.

You press.

The clay yields.

You change direction.

The shape changes.

Something unexpected appears.

Perhaps you follow it.

Perhaps you begin again.

You don't have to make a religious object.

You don't have to keep what you make.

There is no grade for sculpture on this retreat.

Remain attentive while you create.

What draws your hands?

What are you trying to make?

What changes as you work?

What happens when the material resists your intention?

What happens when something you didn't intend becomes more interesting than what you planned?

If a memory comes, acknowledge it.

If a person comes to mind, let them be present.

If a feeling rises, notice it.

If an image or word arrives, receive it.

You don't have to decide whether God put it there.

Simply don't dismiss what comes.

Receive.

Respond.

Listen.

Respond again.

When you reach a stopping place, look at what is there.

Perhaps there are words for God.

Perhaps your hands have already said enough.

Midday

Give Us This Day

Before lunch, pray only this much of the Lord's Prayer:

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

Then prepare your food.

Or receive the meal someone else has prepared.

Notice what it means to be fed.

Bread may actually be on the table.

Or soup.

Fruit.

Fish.

Cheese.

A sandwich.

Something simple.

Something wonderful.

You asked for daily bread.

Now something is being given.

Receive it.

Let being fed be part of the conversation.

The Afternoon

Tend Something

This afternoon, consider responding through care.

If it is safe and appropriate, take your work gloves and a bag and walk along a road, trail, beach, shoreline, campground, or another place where litter has accumulated.

Pick up what doesn't belong there.

A bottle.

A wrapper.

A can.

Plastic caught in grass.

Something somebody dropped and kept walking.

You don't need to clean the world.

Tend this little part of it.

Genesis 2:15 says that the human creature was placed in the garden **“to till it and keep it.”**

For this hour, don't make creation care into an issue to debate.

Look.

Notice.

Bend down.

Pick something up.

Carry it away.

The earth gives.

You receive.

You notice something that diminishes what has been given.

You respond.

The response itself can be prayer.

If picking up trash is not possible or does not fit the place, tend something else.

Water a plant.

Sweep a porch.

Stack firewood.

Clear a trail.

Care for a garden.

Clean a shared space.

Do some small thing that leaves a place more cared for than you found it.

Prayer is not always interior.

Sometimes the dialogue asks something of your hands.

Sometimes love becomes care.

Sometimes gratitude becomes tending.

Sometimes hope becomes repair.

Sometimes faithfulness means resisting, in one small place, what diminishes life.

When you finish, perhaps simply say:

Thank you for entrusting this place to us.

Or let the work itself be your answer.

Later

Let Someone Else Pray

Find a prayer from the Christian tradition.

Perhaps something familiar.

Perhaps something ancient.

A prayer of Augustine.

Teresa of Ávila.

Julian of Norwich.

Francis of Assisi.

A prayer from the Book of Common Worship or another prayer book from your tradition.

A hymn.

A sung Psalm.

If your retreat setting offers communal prayer, you might join it.

Let somebody else choose the words.

These words have already lived in other lives.

Someone hoped through them.

Grieved through them.

Trusted through them.

Waited through them.

Loved God through them.

You have spent years finding words for other people.

For a little while, let the church give words to you.

Notice whether a phrase finds you.

You don't have to write it down.

Receive it as something given.

Let it accompany you.

The First Evening

Prayer Through Beauty

Choose music.

Sacred or secular.

Bach.

Jazz.

A hymn.

A symphony.

Gospel.

Folk music.

Opera.

A singer you love.

An instrumental piece.

Something you've heard a hundred times.

Something new.

Listen without doing anything else.

Don't ask first what it means.

Receive it.

Notice what happens.

A melody may awaken a memory.

A chord may create longing.

A voice may make you unexpectedly sad.

Rhythm may make your body want to move.

Beauty may give you joy without explanation.

Something may awaken hope.

Let what comes enter the relationship.

You don't have to turn it into religious language.

Listen.

Receive.

Respond if a response comes.

Sing.

Play.

Move.

Cry.

Light a candle.

Sit silently.

Listen again.

Or let the music have the last word.

Evening Prayer

Light, Fragrance, Presence

If incense is part of what you brought and it is permitted where you are staying, light it tonight.

Or use the fragrance you brought—a plug-in, warmer, diffuser, flowers, cedar, herbs, or something else whose scent fills the space.

If you are using incense, read Psalm 141:2:

“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”

Watch the smoke rise.

Or simply breathe the fragrance.

Notice how scent moves through a room.

You cannot see where it goes, but you know it is there.

Perhaps the fragrance carries memory.

Perhaps it changes your awareness of the room.

Perhaps it gives pleasure.

Perhaps nothing more happens than that.

Receive what is given.

You may pray with words.

You may lift your hands.

You may light a candle and watch its flame.

You may sit silently.

You may choose something from the palette.

Or perhaps by now you are beginning to recognize that prayer sometimes begins before you decide to pray.

Stay as long as you want.

Then go to bed.

The Second Morning

Let Your Body Pray

This morning, begin with your body.

Read Psalm 95:6:

“O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!”

Choose a posture.

Stand.

Kneel.

Bow.

Sit on the floor.

Lie down.

Open your hands.

Raise your arms.

Stretch.

Walk.

If movement is limited, let whatever movement is available to you be enough.

Notice that prayer has a body.

Your body.

The same body that becomes tired.

The same body that carries stress.

The same body that stands behind the communion table, sits in meetings, drives to hospitals, embraces grieving people, laughs, eats, aches, heals, and gets into bed at night.

Listen to your body for a while.

What is it saying this morning?

What does it receive as life-giving?

Where is there ease?

Where is there resistance?

Where is there energy?

Where is there weariness?

You do not need to fix any of it.

Let your body participate in the dialogue.

A Question Jesus Asked

Read Mark 10:46–52.

Bartimaeus cries out.

Jesus stops.

Then Jesus asks him:

“What do you want me to do for you?”

It is an astonishing question.

Jesus allows Bartimaeus to speak his desire.

Let the question be addressed to you:

What do you want me to do for you?

You don't have to give the answer you think a pastor should give.

You don't have to ask for your congregation.

You don't have to ask for the world.

You may.

But first, hear the question as addressed to you.

What do you desire?

What do you hope for?

What would give life?

What dream have you stopped allowing yourself to name?

What love wants room to grow?

What are you grieving?

What do you wish were different?

Let whatever arises enter the conversation.

Desire is not automatically God's instruction.

Fear is not automatically a warning.

Hope is not automatically a promise.

But all of them can be brought into relationship with God.

Listen.

Speak.

Question.

Wait.

Respond in whatever way fits.

Let prayer be dialogue.

Make Something

Let Creating Become Dialogue

Choose something to make.

Paint.

Sketch.

Shape clay.

Write a poem.

Arrange stones.

Take photographs.

Make music.

Cook.

Build something.

This time, don't think of making as an activity followed by prayer.

Let the creating itself become dialogue.

Suppose you are painting a watercolor of something in nature.

Look at what drew you to it.

Why this tree?

Why this shoreline?

Why this flower?

Why this particular light?

Begin.

As you work, ask.

Listen.

Notice what draws your attention next.

A shadow you hadn't seen.

A color inside another color.

The way one branch reaches toward another.

A scar in the bark.

The reflection rather than the tree.

Let what you are seeing speak before you decide what it means.

Respond with the brush.

Then look again.

Perhaps a memory comes.

A person.

A place.

A feeling.

A fragment of Scripture.

A question.

An unexpected gratitude.

Don't immediately analyze it.

Acknowledge it.

Let it enter the conversation.

If you are working with clay, listen through your hands.

What made you press here?

Why did you change the shape?

What are your hands trying to make?

What happens when the clay resists what you intended?

What happens when something unexpected becomes more interesting than what you planned?

If you are making music, listen to the note you just played before choosing the next one.

If you are writing, listen to the sentence that appeared rather than hurrying toward the sentence you intended.

If you are taking photographs, notice what keeps asking for your attention.

If you are cooking, notice fragrance, texture, color, heat, memory, and anticipation.

Creating has a rhythm:

Receive. Respond. Listen. Respond again.

You do not have to decide which impulse is yours and which is God's.

But don't dismiss inspiration merely because it arrived through your imagination, your senses, your memory, or your hands.

Acknowledge the voice you hear in inspiration, movement, gift, and creation.

Stay in the dialogue.

When the making comes to a stopping place, don't rush to interpret what you have made.

Look at it.

Listen once more.

Perhaps say:

Thank you.

Perhaps ask:

Is there anything more?

Perhaps there is.

Perhaps there isn't.

Let what you have made remain for a while as part of the conversation.

The Final Afternoon

Let the Palette Go

For a while this afternoon, leave the prayer palette behind.

Don't choose a prayer practice.

Go about the afternoon.

Walk if you want to.

Sit.

Read.

Pack a few things.

Make tea.

Look out a window.

Wash something.

Lie down.

Listen to the place.

But now notice your life.

Something catches your attention.

You become concerned about someone.

You see something beautiful.

You feel grateful.

Something makes you angry because it should not be this way.

You imagine what could be.

You remember someone you love.

You feel grief.

You want to make something.

Mend something.

Protect something.

You feel hope.

Don't rush past these moments because you aren't officially praying.

Let them enter your life with God.

Is there something to receive?

Something to hear?

Something to say?

Something to do?

Perhaps prayer has become a little less like something you stop your life to perform and a little more like the way you inhabit your life with God.

Don't try to make that happen.

Just notice whether it already is.

Before You Leave

Where Did Prayer Find You?

Look back over these days.

Not to evaluate them.

Not to decide which practices worked.

Simply remember.

Where did prayer find you?

At the sink?

With clay in your hands?

Before a candle?

In Scripture?

Picking trash from the roadside?

Listening to music?

Breathing a fragrance?

Standing in morning light?

Eating bread?

Making something?

Borrowing someone else's words?

Feeling hope?

Feeling sadness?

Wanting something?

Resisting something?

Unable to find words?

In silence?

In sleep?

Somewhere you didn't expect?

Perhaps prayer found you when you deliberately chose to pray.

Perhaps it found you while you were doing something else.

Perhaps what you began to recognize was not a new technique at all.

Perhaps you were recognizing the relationship.

Something was given.

You noticed.

You received.

You responded.

And the dialogue continued.

Going Home

Your Life with God Is Already a Conversation

It would be easy to leave this retreat with a plan.

Morning silence.

Prayer beads on Tuesdays.

Clay once a month.

A new prayer book.

Twenty minutes of contemplative prayer every day.

Perhaps one of those practices genuinely belongs in your life.

If so, receive it.

But you do not need to turn these days into another spiritual discipline you are responsible for maintaining.

You already have enough things to manage.

Instead, remember what these days have given you.

Prayer may be larger than you had allowed it to become.

The prayers you speak are prayer.

The prayers you borrow are prayer.

Scripture can become prayer.

Silence can become prayer.

But prayer does not end there.

God gives.

You notice.

You receive.

You question.

You listen.

You desire.

You imagine.

You grieve.

You hope.

You create.

You love.

You care.

You resist what diminishes life.

You answer with what you have been given.

And the dialogue continues.

Sometimes the response will be deeply personal.

Rest.

Forgiveness.

A song.

A painting.

A meal.

A conversation.

A desire finally acknowledged.

Sometimes the response will move beyond you.

You feed someone.

Care for creation.

Repair something damaged.

Protect someone vulnerable.

Speak truth.

Offer hospitality.

Make beauty.

Create community.

Seek justice.

Refuse to cooperate with cruelty.

Join your life to something that contributes, however modestly, to human flourishing.

This, too, can belong to prayer.

Not because every action is automatically prayer.

Not because every impulse is God's voice.

But because a life consciously lived in relationship with God becomes a continuing movement of receiving and responding.

There will still be times when everyone turns toward you and waits for you to pray.

You will still lead worship.

Write prayers.

Pray at bedsides.

Open meetings.

Bless meals.

Find words when a community needs words.

That is part of your calling.

But underneath the prayer you lead for others is a relationship that does not belong to your office.

It is yours.

And it is larger than the words you say.

You do not have to perform it.

You do not have to manage it.

You do not have to make it profound.

Notice.

Receive.

Listen.

Speak.

Create.

Care.

Hope.

Love.

Resist what is death-dealing.

Move toward what gives life.

And sometimes simply recognize that the conversation has already begun.

Let prayer become a way of inhabiting the relationship.