

Part II
**Sweet Hours of Prayer:
How Fixed Hour Prayer Nurtures Community**

Ruth Haley Barton

“We are formed together as we learn to pray together. Ancient Jews and Christians uttered sacred prayers together. They did this every day—together. These prayers established sacred rhythms to their days and lives as a community. And they can do the same today. For us. As the Church. As a community of faith.” --Scot McKnight

The practice of ordering our activities around prayer at regular times of the day, which was so significant in Jewish culture and in the early church, is being rediscovered and enthusiastically embraced by many Christians today. Fixed hour prayer 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.

In his book, *Praying with the Church*, Scot McKnight points out that 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 which were central to their spirituality.¹

David alludes to the practice of fixed hour prayer in Psalm 55 when he says, “I call upon God...evening, morning and at noon. I utter my complaint and moan, and he will hear my voice.” Daniel prayed three times a day in spite of the threat to his life if he did so. Peter received his vision regarding Cornelius while he was saying mid-day prayers. And in Acts 3, the first healing miracle after the Ascension took place as Peter and John were on their way to 3:00 prayers in the temple. 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 towards God in the specific context of the hour being prayed—lauds (morning), mid-day, vespers (evening), compline (prayer before retiring). It is no wonder these prayers are powerful—they are the spiritual equivalent of a vitamin-packed power drink!

Hours of Power

Praying at least some of the fixed hours in community has the potential to anchor and shape our identity as communities of believers and offers us a concrete way of opening to the presence of Christ within and among us. As the little group I mentioned in a previous article—the group that eventually became the Transforming Center—continued to meet for prayer and planning regarding the ministry that was emerging among us, we kept praying the hours together and these prayers continue to shape us to this day. Particularly when we are together on retreat or have set aside extended time for work and planning, fixed hour prayer provides the structure for our days and meaning in the midst of everyday life.

Morning Prayer. In the morning, we begin with praise, affirming and celebrating God's presence with us, receiving his loving care towards 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!²*

Mid-day Prayer. 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/invocation is always our heart cry:

*O God, make speed to save us.
O Lord, make haste to help us.*

Oftentimes mid-day prayer will contain some sort of a prayer for wisdom such as this *Collect for Grace*, which is one of our favorites in the Transforming Center.

*O God, by whom we are guided in judgment,
And who raises up for us light in the darkness,
Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties,
The grace to ask what you would have us to do;
That your wisdom may save us from all false choices,
And in your straight path we may not stumble.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.*

If you pray that prayer with any kind of sincerity at all, it is guaranteed to change the trajectory of your day!

Evening Prayer. In the evening as the sun sets and the natural light fades, we acknowledge God as the source of our light and greet one another with expressions of peace.

*You, O Lord, are my lamp.
My God, you make my darkness bright.
Light and in Jesus Christ our Lord,
Thanks be to God!*

In many communities, evening prayer is the longest of the prayer services, offering us the opportunity to place the cares of the day in God's hands as we 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, you 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.*

Evening prayer typically includes the Gospel reading for the day and may include a brief reflection or homily. Later on in the evening prayer service, we offer up general intercessions for ourselves and others, bringing our own specific needs and the burdens we are carrying for others to God. The fact that the intercessions are written for us relieves us of the need to be so wordy in our intercessions—a helpful discipline given the fact that this is another place in the spiritual life where human striving and fixing can so easily take over. As our personal spiritual journeys lead us to a greater capacity to be with God with what is true about us and to rest in him with our own lives, so we are able to hold others and their needs quietly in God’s presence as well.

Written intercessions (also called *Prayers of the People* in some settings) allow us to join together in lifting up our shared concerns to God and then to agree together by praying in unison,

*Lord, in your mercy.
Hear our prayer.*

Night Prayer. When we are together on retreat, we end the day with night prayer in which we celebrate God’s presence during the day and ask him to grant us the rest we need.

*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.*

Night prayer might also include a time of examen in which we are able to confess our sins and receive God’s forgiveness as an important aspect of letting go of the day, receiving God’s gift of

rest, and preparing to receive the new mercies that God will have prepared for us when we awake.

Since these 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. As we pray the hours in community, the Spirit has access to us throughout the day and we are constantly amazed at how God meets us, giving us perspective, assurance, and guidance as we need it far beyond human orchestration.

Opening to God in Community

Although many of us seek to pray the hours when we are alone as well, we have discovered that 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. 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...and 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 very real way, praying with the church through fixed hour prayer expresses that deeper unity that transcends all our divisions—and that is no small thing.

There are many wonderful resources to help us reclaim this particular gift of the Christian tradition. Phyllis Tickle has produced a three-volume prayer guide entitled *The Divine Hours* that is a liturgical reworking of the sixth-century Benedictine Rule of fixed-hour prayer that includes one volume for summertime, one for autumn/winter and one for spring. These are very thick volumes so they are best used at home.

For those who travel, there are several other prayer books that are very useful. One is *Hour by Hour*, an Anglican prayer book based solely on Scripture and *The Book of Common Prayer*. 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. Both are very slim volumes that are easy to travel with and share with others. *The Book of Common Prayer* is another rich resource for fixed hour prayer—alone and together. The point is to search out a prayer book that draws you in and just try it. You have nothing to lose and much to gain!

Practice

While few of us are able to pray all four of the hours each day (morning, mid-day, evening, and night), seeking to incorporate at least one or two of the fixed hours into our days can be a tremendous blessing. Here is a suggestion: Choose the time of day when your desire and need to connect with God is the strongest and start out by seeking to incorporate that one fixed hour prayer into your schedule. Or you may want to start out by simply incorporating the one that is most doable for you at this time.

Do you long to connect with God simply and meaningfully at the beginning of your day? Then start by incorporating ten or fifteen minutes for Morning Prayer at the beginning of your day or during your morning commute.

Are you one who is so intensely focused on work or family that by the time lunch rolls around you realize that you haven't thought about God for hours? Then why not incorporate ten minutes for mid-day prayer right before lunch?

Do you struggle to let go of work in order to make the transition to your evening activities? Do you long for a way to "call it a day" and give more focus to your personal life and your family in the evenings? Then you might consider incorporating evening prayer into your daily rhythm as a way of entrusting the day's work to God, letting it be enough, and moving on to giving full attention to your evening activities.

Do you have trouble letting go and falling asleep at night? Do you struggle with broken sleep or anxiety about sleep? Then consider incorporating night prayer as the very last thing you do before you go to bed each night. Allow night prayer to be a concrete way of entrusting yourself, the cares of the day and your need for rest into God's loving hands.

Since fixed hour prayer is intended to be practiced in community—at least in part—you might want to consider inviting part of your family or community to pray with you. If you choose Morning Prayer, you might do that alone or you might do it with family at breakfast. If you choose mid-day, you might invite a co-worker (s) to pray with you. Evening prayer could easily be incorporated into your evening meal with family and night prayer could be shared with your spouse before you go to bed.

¹ Scot McNight, *Praying with the Church* (Brewster, MS: Paraclete Press, 2006), p.31.

² All prayers are taken from *The Upper Room Worshipbook* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1985); *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 1979); or *Hour by Hour* (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement Publications, 2002)

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

Ruth Haley Barton is founding president of the Transforming Center. A spiritual director, teacher and retreat leader, she is the author of *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, *Sacred Rhythms*, and *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*.

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