

## Hope Is Here – Session 3 Handout

### Contemplative Praying: The Listening, Discerning, Engaging Heart

Hope is not simply a feeling. It is the force of God drawing us toward beloved community. If hope is God at work in the world, prayer becomes the way we attune our hearts and lives to that movement.

#### A Shift in Prayer

Many of us learned prayer primarily as asking God for outcomes. Contemplative prayer asks a different question:

How do I become available to what God is already doing?

#### Quote for Reflection

The outer work can never be small if the inner work is great, neither can the outer be great or good if the inner is little or nothing.

— Meister Eckhart, *The Book of Divine Comfort*

#### Prayer Changes Us

Prayer is more than presenting requests to God. Prayer transforms the one who prays. In prayer we acknowledge our dependence on God and open ourselves to God's presence and guidance.

**Extended Reflection from Luther Smith—read this question and discuss where it connects with your experience and where you would like for it to.**

“Prayer changes things” is more than a pious cliché. Praying transforms us. As we open our hearts to God—whether from gratitude, rejoicing, grief, confusion, or anxiety—we declare that our life's journey relies upon God's love and guidance. Prayer is a means by which heart communicates with Heart. Suffocating delusions of self-sufficiency are expelled. Though the Beloved Companion is “closer to us than we are to ourselves,” the very act of praying declares our desire to experience God's presence in a distinctive way. After an openhearted encounter with God, we are never the same.

Hope enlivens us through prayer. We become hopeful in experiencing intimacy with God in prayer. Even with daunting life challenges that await, the prayerful certainty of God's abiding presence assures us that we can be alive to life and for life. The privilege of speaking our hearts to God in prayer “changes things.” We are changed by the ability to announce what delights us and what distresses us. God hears us!

Still, the personal and communal transformations we seek for justice and beloved community entail more than naming concerns in times of prayer. Prayer involves not only what we say but also our need to listen. Contemplative praying enables us to hear what

hope is saying to us. Though contemplative praying is immediately accessible, being “at home” in it may involve trusting new experiences of listening, discernment, and engaging.

Contemplative praying is a continuum of listening, discerning, and engaging. Each phase is crucial to the others; and all the phases are crucial to the transformative power of contemplative praying. Sometimes we discover that “prayer changes things (including us)” because how we pray has changed.

— Luther E. Smith Jr., *Hope Is Here!* (pp. 75–76)

***Possible Discussion Question:***

How does this quote speak to you? What resonates? What is tough?

**Contemplative Prayer**

Contemplative prayer is not complicated and it is not withdrawing from the world. It is a posture of listening.

When we slow down we begin to notice:

- God’s invitations
- Our fears and desires
- Where love may be calling us next

**Discernment**

Discernment is the bridge between prayer and action. It is learning to notice which movements lead toward life, justice, and beloved community.

Without slowing down we often default to reaction, habit, and urgency.

**Prayer That Moves the Body**

Contemplation is not withdrawal from the world. It prepares us for faithful engagement.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described marching with Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement by saying: “For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was both protest and prayer... I felt my legs were praying.” (*Hope Is Here*, p.101)

***Possible Discussion Question:***

Have you experienced this? What might this look like in your world?

**The Rhythm of Contemplative Prayer**

Listen → Discern → Act → Return to Prayer

**A Simple Weekly Practice**

1. Centering (5 minutes each day)

Sit quietly. Breathe slowly. Pray: “God, open my heart to your presence.”

## 2. Discernment Question--Examen

Where did I notice life today?

Where did I notice resistance to love?

## 3. Embodied Prayer Action

Take one small step aligned with what you heard in prayer.

Examples: reach out to someone, repair a relationship, serve others, or slow down to listen deeply.

### Discussion Questions

- Have you tried a contemplative prayer practice focused on listening?
- When you think about prayer, do you focus more on speaking or listening?
- What makes it difficult to slow down enough to listen for God's guidance?
- When have you experienced prayer helping you discern how to act?
- What might an embodied prayer action look like for you this week?

Prayer forms us into people who participate in God's hope in the world.

*Try to leave time to share prayer requests. If you can't share with whole group, create prayer partners.*