

Wondering in Prayer - Mindy Makant

PRE-LESSON INFORMATION:

SESSION DESCRIPTION

We teach children the Lord's Prayer and prayers for meals and bedtimes, and we often teach children how to pray for friends and family. And this is, of course, right and good. Unfortunately, however, we often stop there, assuming that older children, youth, and adults now "know" how to pray. But we are called to worship God with all of heart and soul and mind. So, in this session we will explore prayer forms that engage the senses and the imagination, opening a space for us both to dwell and to wonder in God.

ELCA FAITH PRACTICES

1. *Living among God's faithful people*
2. *Hearing the word of God*

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will...

1. Understand the importance of learning to wonder in prayer.
2. Develop skills in guiding a variety of contemplative and sensory prayer forms.

BIBLICAL FOCUS

Romans 8:26: Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes^{la} with sighs too deep for words.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Video script/mini-lecture
- Finger labyrinth and instructions
- Instructions for Lectio Divina
- Instructions for the Examen
- Blank paper and colored pencils or crayons
- Power point
- Suggested Scripture passages for meditation for children and youth

LESSON PLAN

Welcome

1. Welcome participants to today's workshop.
2. Explain to participants that the primary objectives of this session are to (1) recognize the role of the practice of prayer in creating and sustaining a sense of wonder and (2) to equip them with the tools for guiding children and youth in concrete practices of imaginative prayer.

Wondering Prayerfully

1. Introduce this brief video to participants by explaining that it is a "mini-lecture" designed to introduce the group to the relationship between prayer and imagination.
2. The video will be 7-10 minutes. It introduces the following concepts:
 - a. Many "impossible things" form the foundation for the Christian faith.
 - b. Among these impossible things is that God has created us to be in relationship – to be friends even – with God.
 - c. Prayer is a gift given to us by God as a means to fostering this friendship.
 - d. Prayer can also be a faithful way to wonder in and about and to God.
 - e. Prayerful wonder requires an act of imagination through which we open ourselves to the mystery that is God.

Prayers

Prayer is not always talking to God. It can also be listening to and simply being with God. You may be familiar with forms of contemplative prayer such as centering prayer. In this session we will explore other forms of contemplative prayer that invite children and youth to meet God in and through their imagination. Imaginative forms of prayer open us to wondering in God. There is a difference in wondering *in* and wondering *about*. And though imaginative forms of prayer may lead to questions about God, in and through imaginative prayer we are free to allow our minds to wander in the wonder that is God's presence with us.

Before you begin, think about ways you might set the stage to invite participants into a state of wonder:

1. Prepare the environment. If possible, use soft lighting such as candles, play soft music, etc.
2. Engage the senses. Place a bowl of water in the prayer space. If they do not already know how to do so, teach the children/youth to dip their fingers in the water and then make the sign of the cross. Explain to them that this is a reminder of their baptism.

Choose one or more of the following forms of imaginative prayer in a single session. Begin by teaching the prayer. Explain what will happen. But prayer, like any practice, is learned through doing. So, once you have explained the prayer, lead your group in prayer. Take your time; let the Holy Spirit guide the process.

1. Finger Prayer Labyrinth

Prior to beginning the labyrinth, provide everyone with a short scripture reading (see Appendix for suggestions) and a copy of the finger labyrinth. One good way of doing this is to fold the scripture reading and ask the participants *not* to look at the passage until they are in the center of the labyrinth.

Releasing: Begin with your index finger (or a stylus) at the opening of the labyrinth. As you slowly follow the path towards the center speak to God. This is a time for confessing both your sins and your anxieties. Do not try to force words, simply offer to God whatever comes to mind

Receiving: When you reach the center, allow yourself to rest for a moment. Pause. Take in a deep breath. Read your scripture passage. Meditate on the passage. This may mean re-reading it slowly numerous times. It may mean allowing yourself to focus on a particular word or two. Allow yourself to be open to God as you read. Return your finger to the center of the labyrinth and reflect on what this passage might mean for you.

Returning: As you begin to leave the center, trace the labyrinth back towards the entrance. As you “leave” this sacred space open yourself to

intercessory prayer. Whatever people, circumstances, or events that come to mind, offer to God. As you reach the opening of the path offer a word of thanks to God for his presence with you.

Adapted from <http://devozine.upperroom.org/spiritual-practices/praying-with-a-finger-labyrinth/>

2. Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a holy reading of Scripture with four primary parts or movements.

To begin, choose a short passage of Scripture. (See Appendix for suggestions.) Remind participants that this is a way of praying the Scriptures; call to mind that you are in the presence of God. Have participants focus on their breathing.

Lectio: Read the passage aloud slowly and deliberately. Ask participants to think about the meaning of the passage. What does it say? This can be done silently/individually or participants can be invited to share.

Meditatio: Read the passage a second time. Ask participants to meditate on the passage. What does this passage say *to me*? Again, this can be done silently/individually or shared.

Oratio: Read the passage a third time. Invite participants to respond to God in prayer.

Contemplatio: Read the passage a fourth time. Maintain a brief period of silence. Ask participants to listen for God's word in this time. What do you

hear God calling you to in response to this passage? Offer participants the opportunity to share if they would like.

3. Ignatian Examen

Though St. Ignatius developed the examen as both a morning and an evening activity, it is a powerful way to end the day.

Before you begin to pray, call to mind that you are in the presence of God. Have participants focus on their breathing.

The examen traditionally has five steps. Two possible ways of making the Examen physical, especially for younger participants:

- a. Have participants hold up a finger as you go through the steps
- b. Have participants draw a picture of something that comes to mind as your progress through each step.

The Examen:

Gratitude: Give thanks to God for the day. The point of this step is not to focus on the details of the day, but on the gift of the day and on the one who gives it.

Petition: Ask the Holy Spirit for the courage and wisdom to reflect well on the day.

Review: Think about your day as objectively as you can. Use the following questions as guides:

- a. What were the highs?
- b. What were the lows?
- c. Where was I enabled to do good?
- d. When did I show love?
- e. Where did I fail to do good?
- f. When did I fail to show love?
- g. When did I experience God's presence?

Repent: Ask for forgiveness for any sins committed (both those named above and any still hidden from you) and for any failings to do the good you could have done.

Renew: Pray for the grace to accept God's forgiveness and the courage and commitment to begin anew and to show God's love in all that you say and do.

Reflect

Close the prayer exercise by asking participants to reflect on their experience. What did you feel? Think? Was this difficult/uncomfortable at all? If so, what parts and why?

Reflect on the difference between prayers that are primarily cognitive and this experience with prayers that are involve the imagination.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Tobin Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2003).

Tony Jones and Phyllis Tickle, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

Sybil MacBeth, *Praying in Color*. See website: <http://prayingincolor.com/>. This is an excellent resource for praying with children

Aliyah Schick, *Meditative Coloring Book 5: Labyrinths*

Eline Snei, *Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids*. (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2013).

This book is not a book on Christian prayer. But it has very helpful meditation exercises that can be easily adapted and used with children to teach them to pray.

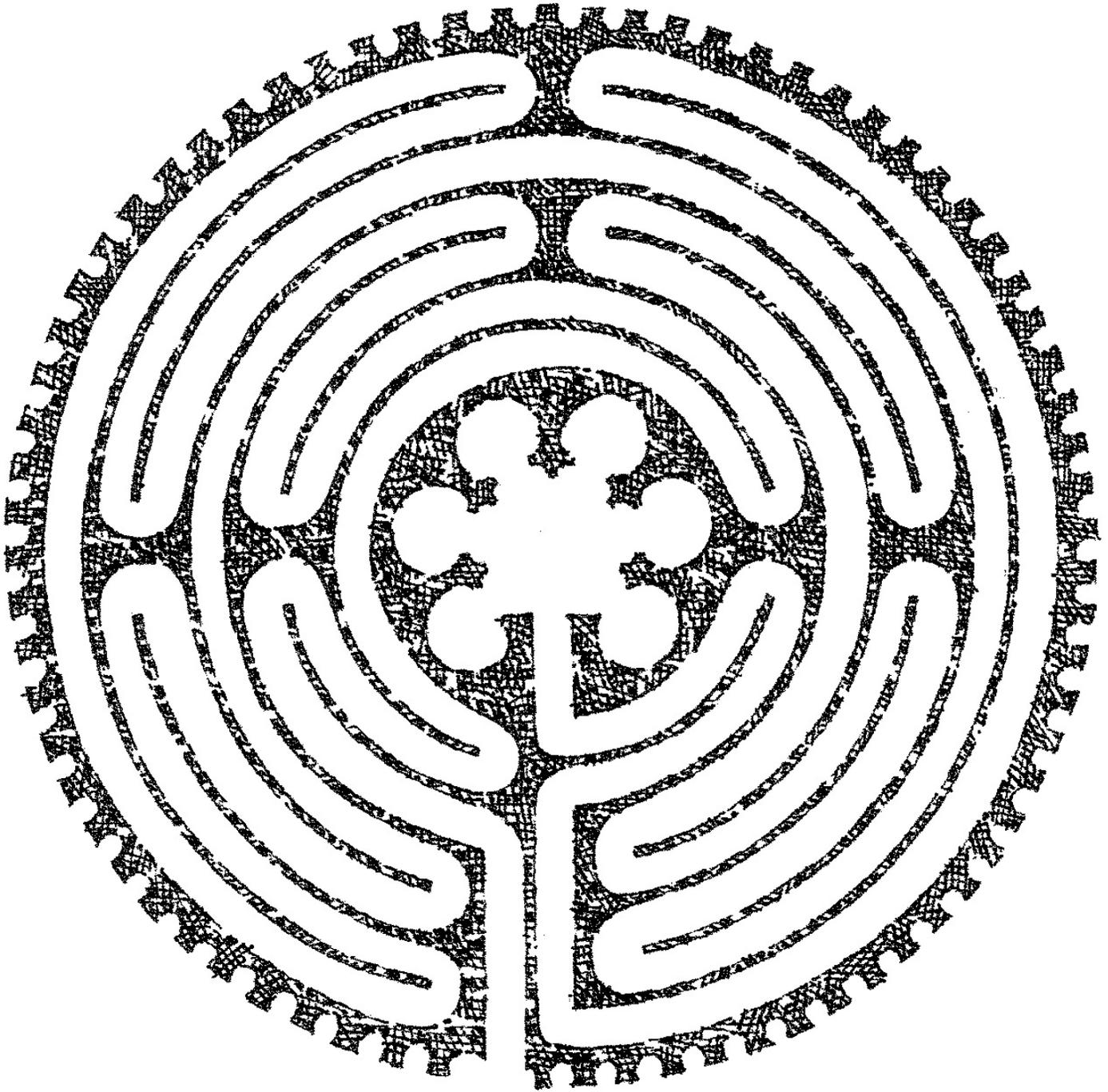
Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998)

Mike Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) and *Dangerous Wonder* (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2003).

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mindy Makant is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Lenoir-Rhyne University where she teaches courses on Religion and Culture and directs the Youth and Family Ministry program. Her academic interests include the relationship between imagination and the theological/spiritual formation and on pastoral care in the aftermath of traumatic events. She lives in Hildebran, NC with her husband (an ELCA pastor) and they are the parents of two semi-grown children, both of whom are students at Lenoir-Rhyne.

FINGER LABYRINTH



Scriptures for Wondering in Prayer: This is by no means an exhaustive list, but is rather a suggested starting point.

Psalm 8

Psalm 62:5-8

Isaiah 6:1-9

Isaiah 30:18-26

Isaiah 43:2-7

Matthew 6:5-8

Matthew 11:28-30

Matthew 13:44-46

Mark 4:35-41

Luke 6:46-49

Luke 7: 36-50

Luke 9:18-22

Luke 12:22-32

John 1:35-39

John 21: 15-17

Romans 8:14-17

Romans 8:26-27

2 Corinthians 6:16-17

1 John 4: 7-11

Wondering Prayerfully (Video Script)

"Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Through the Looking Glass

The Christian faith asks - even demands - us to believe many things that are, quite frankly, impossible. In fact, the Christian faith is predicated upon belief in the impossible, on mystery. A For example, we all know - beyond a shadow of a doubt - that dead folks stay dead. Period. Unless they don't.

Another impossible thing Christians believe is that God wants to be in relationship with us. In fact, God wants to be intimate with us. St. Thomas Aquinas (one of the "fathers of the church") teaches that part of what it means to be created in the image of God means that we are created for friendship with God. And, of course, this means children too.

Friendship is a complicated thing. To be friends with someone is to know them with a much greater degree of intimacy than we know most of the people we see every day. But no matter how well we know another person there is always much that is unknown. The other person always remains somewhat of a mystery to us. And this is a good thing! In this place of mystery I can not only *be* myself, but I can discover myself. Friendship is not something we can control. Instead it is - as theologian Paul Waddell says - an adventure we enter into. An adventure that will likely shape the very essence of who we are.

How do we become friends with someone?

Time. Some of this time is active time spent *doing* something - playing games, talking, hiking, eating, etc. But sometimes friends are folks we do life with, often by simply *being* together.

So, how do we become friends with God? How do we enter into a life-transforming adventure with the Lord of the universe?

Again the answer is time. And this time includes worship, Bible study, serving others, and - of course - prayer.

When we think of teaching children to pray I think, overall, we do a pretty good job at teaching them intercessory prayer, table and bedtime prayers, and liturgical prayer. In other words, we do a pretty good job at teaching little ones how to talk to God - how to *do* prayer - but friendship can't be all about one person talking and the other listening. We also need to teach children how to simply be present *with* God and to listen *for* and *to* God.

Why don't we teach children how to be with God and listen to God?

I think we, as adults, are uncomfortable with silence and, often, we are uncomfortable with God. We often don't know how to be with one another, let alone with God, without filling up the space with noise.

The mystery, the impossible reality, that God chooses to befriend us, to become incarnate and live among us, is beyond comprehension. We cannot reason our way into understanding the mystery of God. We can, however, wonder prayerfully in the mystery of God. And the imagination is the vehicle of wonder. Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world." Imaginative prayer – wondering prayerfully – can allow us to fill up that space with wonder instead of noise. In using the language of imaginative, I need to make a careful distinction between "imaginative" and "imaginary".

"Imaginary," of course, means something that is not real, not there. Something that is made up. And of course, the creation of the imaginary is an act of the imagination. But the imagination helps us do much, much more than make things up. It is the imagination which makes it possible for us to "see" what is real even if/when it is not that which is most apparent.

In fact, it is the imagination that makes believing impossible things possible. *Not* because they are not true, but because they cannot be easily seen.

"Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

By using our imaginations in prayer we open ourselves up to the mystery that is God and make possible the seemingly impossible reality of friendship with God.



**PRACTICE
DISCIPLESHIP**

*This curriculum was developed for the Practice Discipleship Initiative. Practice Discipleship is a ministry of the ELCA Youth Ministry Network in close partnership with the ELCA and its synods. It is funded by the Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit of the ELCA as an extension of the ministry of the ELCA Youth Gathering. Permission is given to use these resources in your local context, so long as no organization or individual profits from the use of these materials. For more information please visit

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