

The Service for the Lord's Day is a service of Word and Sacrament. We gather in the presence of the risen Christ, who appeared to the disciples on the first day of the week to open the Scriptures and break bread. Following Christ's example, the Church proclaims the gospel through Word and Sacrament each Lord's Day.

An order of worship provides a meaningful pattern for this encounter with God. More than a sequence of actions, it shapes our faith over time, forming us as Christ's disciples.

The order of worship is rooted in Scripture, the traditions of the universal Church, and our Reformed heritage. Centered on Gathering, Word, Sacrament, and Sending, it keeps Word and Sacrament at the heart of the Church's life and worship.

Today, we come to the lifeblood of our worship. Flowing through the service and binding its various parts together are prayer, music, and singing.

What is prayer, and why do we do it? Like the Sacraments, we engage in it because Jesus modeled it.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' disciples approach him with a request. John the Baptizer has been giving his followers instruction about prayer, and Jesus' disciples want the same: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). In response, Jesus teaches them how to pray a version of what we now call the Lord's Prayer.

But there are many other times and places when the witness of Jesus' prayer life comes through his living of it. The disciples have broken bread with Jesus after he has given thanks

for it (John 6:11). They have heard him quote Scripture from memory, the fruit of a lifetime of hearing it daily (Mark 12:10–11), and likely sung songs of faith with him, both the psalms and elements of the Jewish liturgy. They have seen him go off by himself, sharing words with God alone (Luke 9:18), and heard him suggest that they do the same (Matthew 6:6). Jesus takes time to pray before engaging in ministry, whether it is a matter of preaching (Mark 1:35) or preparing for great personal sacrifice (John 15–17). He tells of standing when you pray (Mark 11:25), or keeping eyes downcast (Luke 18:13); he kneels (Luke 22:41–45) and he lies prostrate (Mark 14:35). The disciples have feasted with him (Luke 5:33–35), and heard the story of his long fast (Luke 4:1–2). He has been hospitable when they felt it was a bad idea (Matthew 19:13–14), and some slept as he sought to discern the will of God (Luke 22:45). Jesus called God “Father” (John 18:19), and compared himself to a mother hen (Luke 13:34). His confidence in the power of prayer knew no bounds (Matthew 17:20), even in his deepest despair (Mark 14:36).

Jesus taught the disciples how to pray, in ways they would come to recognize only later, and he demonstrated that the Holy One of Israel is big enough that there can be many ways to pray. Our Creator, imaginative enough to form chrysalis and chrysanthemum, gnu and gneiss, would reach out to all whose hearts are hungry, who are restless until they find their rest in God.

(adapted from the Introduction to *Lord, Teach Us to Pray* by the Office of Spiritual Formation, PCUSA)

Many people will say, “I don’t know how to pray.” And yet, in this brief survey of the Gospels, Jesus gives us oodles of examples—and Jesus does not judge how we do it. The concern is *that* we do it; *that* we are always keeping God at the forefront of our minds and hearts.

Therefore prayer is threaded throughout Reformed worship. Our prayers are composed in everyday, common language, speaking to our highs and lows, the very essence of our experience. Sometimes it can take a chunk of time to hear the prayers from the congregation—but that is vital. How prayer works is a mystery – yet there is power in knowing that we hear one another, and that we are not alone in our concerns and celebrations, our suffering or our delight.

We pray for God to accept what we offer, and the words and meditations of our mouths and hearts.

We pray for Christ to be fully present with us when we receive communion.

We pray for the Triune God to bless the one who commits their life through baptism – whether as an infant, teenager, or adult.

And as we leave worship, we pray for God’s Spirit to travel with us into daily life, that we may remain mindful of God’s presence.

The prayer we offer in worship becomes a template for the rest of the week. As Jesus modeled, prayer wasn’t reserved for the synagogue or temple. Prayer simply is our conversation with God—God wants most of all to be in relationship with us.

Theologian and author Anne Lamott coalesced prayer into three words: “Help, Thanks, Wow,” teaching that true prayer is simply honest, raw communication from the human heart.

Another way that we pray in worship is with music. You may recall that during the first sermon of this series I shared what one of our Christian ancestors, Saint Augustine of

Hippo (354–430 CE), famously wrote in Latin: “Qui cantat, bis orat.” This means, “One who sings, prays twice.”

This week’s anthem is a good example of how I understand St. Augustine’s sentiment. The lyrics are provocative: belief that the sun is shining somewhere even in the middle of the night; belief in love even when we feel unloved; and belief in God even when God is silent. The words speak to our experience and the power of faith when we feel alone.

These are very real feelings. Leaning into today’s texts, we have stories of cinematic proportion. Each story places faith in a geographic landscape: Elijah on a mountainside gazing out on a vast vista; Peter and the rest of the disciples on a sea of swirling waves.

In each instance, the question “Where is God?” is answered. For the poignancy of the response to be felt in the gut, the scenes turn violent and noisy. Elijah endures a wind so fierce that it breaks off pieces of the mountain, an earthquake, and a firestorm. Peter and the disciples find themselves on the Sea of Galilee in a similar situation, with the wind churning the sea into chaos. In neither instance does God appear to be present.

As each story reaches its climax, the reader is given a gift. In one story, in a terrible moment when one could feel utterly alone, God’s presence is revealed in the silence. There, as the NRSV puts it, “in the sheer silence,” the prophet discovers the presence of Adonai—the Holy One who promised always to be nearby. Despite the preceding terror, the prophet is buoyed by God’s presence and prepared for whatever God calls them into next.

In the other story, as the storm is raging around them and the disciples are wondering who is going to save them, God miraculously, unfathomably comes to them on the water in the

person of Jesus. Just as Adonai spoke words of comfort to Moses at the burning bush, Jesus says to the disciples, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Peter is calmed for a moment—enough to engage his faith and walk on the water. That is, until the ongoing chaos catches his attention once again, and he begins to succumb to doubt. He employs one of Anne Lamott’s prayers and says, “Help.” Or, more to the point, “Lord, save me!”

The cinematic qualities of the stories can certainly grab our attention. But did you notice what happened when Mark A. Miller added musical texture to his anthem? “I believe in God, even when God is silent.” Begin first with the context of the lyrics: These words of faith were discovered inscribed on a wall in a cellar in Cologne, Germany, where people hid during the Holocaust. Please take that information in.

The music adds another element to the answer of God’s presence in seeming absence. Starting with one unison voice, it builds to a crescendo of all the voices singing about the power of love. I don’t know how it felt for you, but singing it caused the hair on the back of my neck to stand up. With music and harmony, the words move from contemplation in my head to a full embodied understanding that registers in my spirit. Suddenly, I’m closer to grasping what Elijah and Peter were feeling when God seemed absent—and yet was present in a calming and empowering way.

Using words, we pray once. With the addition of music, we pray twice. But we don’t limit the musical expression to the choirs. No, no, no—behold the magic of hymns. By inviting the congregation to sing throughout the service, we express our prayers in this multifaceted way as well. Say the words, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty,” it’s a decent declaration of faith. But set those lyrics to an open-stopped organ and all of a sudden my bones are connecting with that proclamation. Or, in Advent, we sing the airy, monastic tune, “Let all mortal flesh keep silence.” It fits the season perfectly—it puts us in a mood of anticipation.

We all have hymns and songs that cause us to connect more deeply to our faith, offering a richer texture to our prayer lives.

In our liturgy, music serves to emphasize the movements we spoke of at the beginning. The prelude and postlude bracket our time together, and instrumental music helps usher us through our time of ritual prayer. During the Gathering, a hymn of praise follows the Call to Worship. We sing a short refrain after the prayer of reconciliation, giving thanks for God's grace and mercy. Before the Scripture, a hymn honors God through our offerings and service and prepares us to hear the Word. A sending hymn blesses us on our way, encouraging us to take what we have received in worship and share it with those we encounter during the week.

Prayer, music, and singing all help center our hearts as we hear the Word proclaimed and orient ourselves to share the good news out in the world—like the prophet and disciples, wherever God sends us.

Next week, we will take a look at creeds, confessions, and statements of faith, and how they play a role in our liturgical lives.