

FAITH JOURNEY

AVONDALE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

FALL 2013



God Does Not Need Our Prayers. We Do.

Lessons from Haiti, an intensive care unit,
and the kitchen table.



“Our faith stories remind us that we belong to God and it is God who directs our journey. We believe that one day we will return to God and the journey will be complete.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

Secret, solitary, communal or sung, Jesus advocated prayer as the practice where we might lose ourselves in God. When we enter into prayer there is a gradual shift out of ourselves into the heart of God.

Perhaps what I most know about prayer I learned not from the writings of theologians, but rather from those who live the life of prayer – a host of average people who are not overly profound with a methodology, but simply talk to God in a regular and faithful manner. They're devoted Christians who exemplify the hymn words:

*“Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged: Take it to the Lord in prayer!”*

I am not content to leave prayer to the experts. There is much to be learned from the honest language of the heart and the prayers of children. To quote Christopher Robin:

*“God bless Mummy – I know that’s right,
Wasn’t it fun in the bath tonight?
The cold’s so cold and the hot’s so hot;
Oh, “God bless Daddy,” - I quite forgot.”*

For many, living life as prayer is not so simple. I've known some who have ceased praying believing it to be a waste of time. I have listened to church leaders share their desire to welcome more intentional, prayerful listening, but also realize that these same individuals find it enormously difficult to devote time for prayer on a daily basis. Our inner desire to grow spiritually is often miles apart from the outward demands of daily life.

We advance in years often becoming more skeptical and cynical in our prayer requests. Our patience with God runs thin and our demands upon God increase. We storm heaven during times of greatest need and treat God as if God were unnecessary during times of calm sailing. There are also those who walk away from the practice of prayer, disappointed and distant. In their walking they separate themselves from communion with God.

Because prayer is so personal, it calls for a level of honesty. Which one of us has not found ourselves thanking God for beauty, art, music and literature? Which one of us has not found ourselves asking to be forgiven from something too large for human minds to let go? Which one of us has not found ourselves standing at a bedside praying for a situation which seemed utterly hopeless? Does any one of us believe that we are self-made and have become all that we are without the spiritual guidance, direction and prayers of others?

Remember Jesus felt the need for prayer, taught prayer and practiced prayer. Jesus commanded us to pray. At the end of each day we remember that prayer is the essence of our communication with God.



John prays with a woman in Haiti. Turn the page to read Sharon McCarthy's story on what she learned from these moments.

John Earl

Senior Pastor

A LIFE SHAPED BY PRAYER

by Rena White

Emily Bearden knows prayer makes a difference. But she doesn't see it as a way to get God's ear.

"God does not need our prayers. We are the ones that need prayer to stay close to God. He remains close to us regardless," she says.

And so she spends time each day in silence, listening as God speaks to her. But it's not exactly through words. She says it's a feeling that comes from the inside. God let's her know what she should be doing. It's been that way for most of her 91 years.

Emily grew up in a home where prayer was part of everyday life. Her family prayed before bed time. They prayed before meals. And her parents always stressed that praying wasn't just stringing together nice sentences to impress people. It was to develop a relationship with God. Emily laughs



Emily Bearden at her kitchen table, writing her daily "Grace Notes".

when she remembers her father giving the blessing before the meal. He'd always mumble. Once, she pointed out to him she couldn't understand what he was saying. He responded, "I wasn't talking to you."

Emily begins and ends each day in prayer. That prepares her for the day ahead and reminds

her, she says, that "there is nothing together we can't handle." That confidence gives her a grace that you can easily see in her actions, her humor, and concern for others. Throughout the day, she's in constant dialogue with God. Her prayers are short and simple, often just a few words. Her evening prayers are her favorites. She sits at a simple, wooden table in her kitchen and writes in her prayer journal she calls "Grace Notes." As she writes, she prays for each person she mentions. And she ends with "Thy will be done." Often she's not exactly sure what God's will is, but she says, "God can always see the bigger picture." That always assures her.



A LESSON IN PRAYER FROM HAITI

by Sharon McCarthy



David Mitchell, Jim Bowen and Sharon McCarthy measuring out rice to deliver to the elderly.

I am learning how to pray. It's not a new thing to me. Prayer has surrounded me my whole life. Growing up my mother would kneel at the foot of my bed every night, bow her head, fold her hands and silently move her lips. When I had children, I always bowed my head in church to make sure they knew it was important. But why it was important, I wasn't so sure.

Only in recent years have I come to realize I need prayer in my life. I want to talk to God and express my praise or anguish or gratitude to Him. Praying helps me hear God and recognize He is with me, with all of us. I had been working on praying for awhile before going to Haiti last fall. But there was a moment in that cha-

otic, friendly, needy place, so unlike Charlotte that showed me what prayer can do.

When we arrived in Haiti we broke into two groups, one to begin a construction project and one to purchase and deliver food to the elderly poor in the town of Milot. I helped deliver food. We would present them with rice, dried beans, and a bottle of cooking oil. With the help of a translator, we exchanged a few words. I kept practicing how to say "God Bless You" and then would forget it before we got to the next house. We would shake their hands, sometimes share a hug and a kiss on both cheeks, and be on our way.

A few days in, we decided to deliver food as a whole group.

Our first stop was an elderly woman who lived alone. She was sitting on a little chair inside her hut. It was so small not all of us could fit inside. Dr. Earl took her hand and spoke to her and the translator repeated his words. Then I realized something had changed. Dr. Earl knelt beside her, put his hand on her shoulder, and the translator did the same. Their eyes were closed. I couldn't hear the words. In fact, all sound faded away and I watched Dr. Earl's lips moving.

I was overcome with a feeling of awe and then humility, that I was witnessing something sacred. God was there in that tiny, crowded hut in Haiti. In fact, God had been with us all the time, but I didn't feel His presence so

strongly until that prayer. We had been connecting with people through hugs and handshakes, but that prayer was what connected us together with God.

This scene was repeated at every stop over the next two days and I tried to stand close each time to feel that holy moment. I thought of my mother kneeling at my bedside. I thought of bowing my head at Avondale on Sundays. And here we were delivering food and praying in this foreign place surrounded by all these smiles and need. God was including and connecting me to the people standing here in Haiti and in Charlotte and across time.

Those moments were heady and wonderful, but after such a

chaotic day I also needed God to ground me through prayer. In the evenings we gathered as a group to read the Bible, pray, and reflect on our day. The familiar faces and order of worship connected me to home. And when I see those familiar faces back at Avondale now, they connect me to Haiti.

Did going to Haiti flip some kind of switch? I think so in the sense that I was removed from my routine and able to focus on the need in front of me. I also believe that my daily prayer life helped prepare me for



Sharon walks the greenway as part of her prayer routine.

these experiences in Haiti as I tried to stay open to whatever came my way.

That entails setting aside a specific time to pray. The place is important too. I pray while walking on the greenway and in a special chair in my living room.

Since returning from Haiti I continue to feel that strong link, especially in worship on Sunday and taking communion together as a congregation. I also feel God's presence more readily while praying on my own. And at least once when I was going about a task, preoccupied with a concern, I very distinctly heard a voice over my shoulder telling me that God's intention for my life was for more than worrying about that problem. I know God has been trying to speak to me my whole life and now I'm just learning how to listen and respond.



Sharon McCarthy, guide Jacquelin Valmyr, his wife and son, Jim Bowen, Stacey Longshore and David Mitchell deliver food to an elderly woman in the village of Milot.

STARTING WITH SONG, ENDING WITH DEVOTION, PRAYING ALL THE WHILE

by Lisa Miller

Most Thursday nights the choir meets to run through Sunday's anthems. The pews are empty. The choir is in their everyday clothes. And the songs stop and start. It's practice, but Dave Comstock also regards it as prayer. "We do nothing but pray the whole time because that's what song is," he says.

So when Dave heard about a push to include prayer during every church meeting, he wondered what that meant for choir practice. It was Holy Week five years ago when he asked Regina for a few minutes to try to tie what they were singing to the lectionary text. That is a tidy way to describe what Dave came up with.

His devotional did start off with the lectionary text, but from there it brought up the movie *Field of Dreams*, a soldier receiving the Medal of Honor after his death, and some personal reflections on feeling the love of God. He had written it all down before practice and he was nervous sharing it. But he told himself, "There's not a person in the choir that doesn't love me in some way."

Dave read it and his fellow choir members were surprised. He knows that. He's not necessarily the first person you might imagine writing personal devotions that read like poetry. But the choir enjoyed it and encouraged him.

Dave has stuck with it. He has written a devotion for every rehearsal the past five years. He thinks them through in the car, as he's reading a book, and sometimes while listening to the sermon on Sunday. He usually reads them at the end of practice in his deep, matter-of-fact voice.

"It's like a spiritual back rub. It washes over you and then it's time to go," says fellow choir member Jim Bowen. Nancy Favor says a few of them have made her cry like one about Dave's cat Smudge, which hits on God's love for us and our hesitance accepting it. That same one made music director Regina Love laugh out loud. She says the devotions focus everyone on why they're here.

Dave says maybe his devotions are prayers, maybe they're poetry at times, but he prefers to just think of them as stories.



Dave Comstock at his desk where he writes his weekly devotion.

December 13, 2012

by Dave Comstock

...It has been a while since Regina has told us that an anthem would change our lives. She did for this week with *Jesus, Springing*.

How could it not?

The poetry of the season

Simple, beautiful

Our faith in a handful of words within a few minutes of song

the same tree sawn for the cradle as for the cross,

from the same seed held in our hearts a truth we know as deeply as anything in our lives

when we prepare the way for His birth we prepare the way for His death, prepared again for His birth

It is a story to be shared.

It is a song to be loved.

Devotion for August 29, 2013 by Dave Comstock

Did you miss me?
I missed you.
A man joins them on the road
the same man yesterday, today and forever
(Hebrews 13:8)
yet to them unrecognized
Cleopas asks (Luke 24:18)
Haven't you heard?
where have you been that you have failed to
hear?

Did you miss me?
I missed you.
Here I am
Do you still miss me?
A place at the table
for a guest
a long time coming to this place
bread is broken
blessed, a blessing of invitation
reestablishing my presence
in your sight
the master as a guest
within your heart
entertaining angels, (Hebrews 13:2)
entertaining Life,
without knowing it.

Did you miss me?
I missed you.
a long time coming to this place
lessons of flood and fire and plague
leading to a birth
that would be humiliating
in its poverty
if it were not for its
wealth in Hope;
lessons leading to a humiliating death
humiliating in the
commonness of violence
the violence of a crowd,
my people.

Haven't you heard?
Apparently not.

Risen,
that's a fools dream
an entertaining fiction
Risen,
as if I would meet you
on the road
and you would walk
hand in hand with me
not knowing whose
hand you hold as you journey
a long time coming to this place
gone a few days
and you've already
forgotten my promise to be *with you always*
(Matthew 28:20)

bread is broken
your spirits mended
out of nowhere
disrupting your day
raising you
upon the wings of angels
from that moment
unrecognized



MAKING SPACE FOR GOD IN THE WORK DAY

by Brandy Lee



Joy Callaway keeps prayer a part of her life at work.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 teaches us to pray without ceasing; to always keep God at the front of our minds. In a society that does not particularly encourage talking about faith, Christians often struggle with crossing the lines of propriety with praying in the workplace. Joy Callaway, who works with her family, says “being open about our faith is encouraged and people initiate prayer openly.” That’s understandable. After all, she comes from a Christian family. But what a special culture it could be if everyone felt comfortable to pray and invite others to pray with them in the work place. Imagine the relationships that could be built and the amount of people who could see God through their coworkers.

“I’ve found that even in jobs

where people aren’t as forthcoming, eventually Christians find each other,” says Joy. “It’s as simple as telling someone you work with, ‘I’ll be praying for you’ when they’re having a difficult time. Sometimes that opens a conversation about faith and you end up with a few buddies to pray with at work.”

How often have you been at work and, in the midst of a brief conversation, a co-worker says something that leads you to believe you share a faith in Jesus Christ? We then feel comforted and secure putting Christ at the center of our conversation. Finding co-workers who are also serious about living out their Christian commitment gives mutual encouragement to keep our minds on God throughout the day, to serve as godly examples,

and to work for His glory.

In my second year of teaching, I remember often coming into school early to make copies for my students. I would notice a light on in the classroom across the hall from me. I also noticed that the window to the classroom was usually covered with paper so no one could see in. This particular co-worker was very soft spoken. She carried a gentle smile on her face. I’ve never seen her step out of character when dealing with her students. One day while trading stories during our downtime, she explained that she always gets to work early to walk through the aisles in her classroom so that she can meditate and pray over her day. It was such an eye-opening conversation because too often we are so blinded by the hustle and bustle of life that we forget to allow God to guide us through the stress of the day. That teacher is now retired. I try to share that experience as often as I can because it’s a reminder of how powerful prayer is in our lives. As Christians, we serve as ambassadors of the Gospel and because we spend so much time at work it is a great opportunity to share Him with others.

WHEN PRAYING BECOMES LIKE BREATHING

by Brandy Lee



Listening is a big part of Ted Todd's prayer life.

pass down those basic practices to our children. The unconventional thought is that we become one with prayer, so praying is almost like breathing.

That's how Ted Todd strives to pray. He says God wants to have an intimate relationship with us and prayer allows that connection to manifest. To him prayer is less about forming words to say to God and more about listening closely and trying to decipher God's will. Here's how he explains it:

"Prayer is something that you allow to happen in you. In silence and solitude, it requires you to take down your fences and approach God with a naked honesty. To listen is to make yourself completely open and sensitive to the Spirit's guiding. It's an invitation to hear, see, and commune. What this means is our behaviors, our conversations, and our thoughts begin to transform and align with God's will and words. So you begin to make way for a larger space in your life to better recognize God's presence, wisdom and love. The Spirit is no longer beckoning you as much as residing in your heart. When we are constantly praying like this we do not focus on remembering what we need to pray for, we are the prayer itself."

Most Christians are taught how to pray at a young age. Kneeling by the side of the bed at night and folding your hands together at the dinner table is a common childhood memory for many of us. As adults, we've been conditioned to recite prayers and

"In my life, a prayerful silence is essential: if I don't make space for it I feel like I am suffocating. I lose all clarity. Focusing more on quieting my mind to hear God speak is a practice that has greatly strengthened my prayer life."

God speaks to people in different ways, but perhaps we would receive more wisdom if we stopped, listened, and opened our hearts to receiving His words instead of purging ours. We are constantly evolving and growing in Christ and like any relationship we must be effective listeners. Like Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, finding comfort, peace, and wisdom in His words, opening our hearts and minds to God's direction will help us become a constant prayer.

Ted uses the labyrinth to help him pray.



IN GOD'S HANDS

by Reverend Chris Lee



Erin Lee, now a happy 2 year old.

When approached about writing on prayer, the wheels in my mind began to churn. I sought to answer this question: How is prayer an important part of my life? After much deliberation it became clear that any academic analysis that relies only on my theological training and experience leading prayers as a minister or leader in the church would not suffice to explain the power of prayer. What I share is a deeply personal and intimate account of a very troubling time in my life and how a short and simple prayer changed everything, teaching me a lesson that will serve me not only in the task and call of ministry, but as a man, as a father, and as a husband.

The experience is one that caused me to confront my own

powerlessness. When my daughter was born, she was sick. She had a severe infection which caused abnormalities in her blood that the doctors struggled to identify or explain. Her skin was blue and cold; she was barely breathing. She was admitted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Presbyterian Hospital in Huntersville. The doctors sat with me and my wife, throwing out big words and hypothetical scenarios as to the causes of her illness and the hopes of her recovery. The doctors didn't know nor could they tell us with any certainty that Erin would be okay. The hospital brought in a specialist which raised our hopes. We thought he or she would know exactly what to do. After a lengthy consulta-

tion, we were left in the same place, the place of doubt. He assured us that they would flush her system with every antibiotic they could, hoping to eradicate the infection.

Words cannot describe the pain, the fear, or the doubt that loomed over me and Brandy as we watched Erin's little body, connected to all manner of wires and monitors. We could not even touch her as she lay in an oxygen-rich environment provided by the clear apparatus, or what Brandy and I called a box. We stayed with her for hours, hoping and waiting. Brandy eventually returned to her hospital room for some much-needed rest and I decided to go home and let our dog Rocky out. It was an excuse

Brandy and Chris Lee take Erin home after a difficult week in the hospital.



to get away for a while.

Before leaving I said a prayer. I could not touch her so I simply laid my hands on the apparatus that surrounded her. My prayer was this: "Lord, hold my daughter because I can't. Amen." For reasons I will never know, I never asked God to make her well; all I wanted was for someone to hold her and I could think of no one else than God. As I walked down the hallway to the elevator, God's Spirit spoke to me in a very audible and clear way; it stopped me in my tracks. God's voice said, "What about the other children? Why did you not pray for them?" I immediately turned around, washed my hands, entered the NICU and stood in the middle of the room. I didn't want the nurses or staff to think I was a

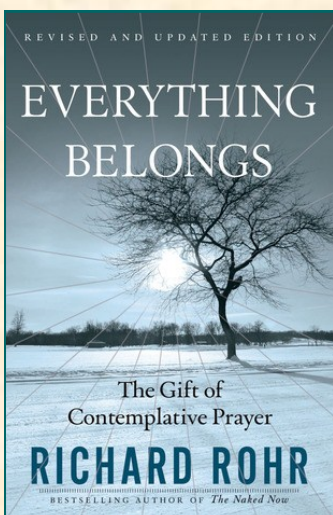
"weirdo" or anything, so I waited until the nurses walked into the back office. I raised my hands and prayed, "Lord, hold all of these, your children, and hold their parents because we all need to be held by You."

To sum up what I could go on forever about, seven days later we took our healthy daughter home. I don't know what happened with all of the other parents and children. There is not a day that goes by when I do not think to myself, "I hope they all took their children home." I get sad when I think of the very real possibility that someone didn't. What I do know is that when confronted with the darkest and scariest time my wife and I ever experienced, I prayed. Not a long prayer, but a prayer from the

very depths of my being. I wish I could say that the biggest lesson I learned was that God was present and in control, healing Erin in that NICU. God taught me something greater; God taught me to never, ever only approach God's throne making supplication for myself, but that all people hurt, that all people struggle, that all people need someone to hold them when no one else can. The world doesn't need Christians with all the answers; the world needs Christians willing to pray.

The next time you see Erin run into my arms in the narthex after worship, know that God hugged her long before I ever did. A father's love for his child is great, but God's love for God's children is infinitely greater.

A Reading Suggestion to Grow Avondale's Prayer Life



The 2013 year has provided church leadership with the opportunity to examine the life of prayer at Avondale. Leadership believes the prayer life at Avondale has a direct bearing on everything done, beginning with worship. Together elders have made a commitment to read Richard Rohr's book on contemplative prayer called *Everything Belongs*. Previous misconceptions and practices of prayer are set aside when we realize the impossibility of trying to enter or attain the presence of God through prayer. Rohr reminds us that from the first moment of creation all of us are held and contained within the presence of God. At best, through the regular and daily practice of prayer, we awaken that awareness within us of who God is. Rohr's book on prayer is well worth reading for all of us. It calls us to never cease praying. "To stay with the pain of life, without answers, without conclusions, and some days without meaning. That is the path, the perilous dark path of true prayer."

We all have faith stories and know of intriguing ones. To share your own faith stories or one you think others should know about, or to write for Faith Journey contact Lisa Miller at 248-770-7400 or lamiller55@gmail.com. Pick up extra copies in the church office to share with friends. Our Faith Journey designer is Ginny Mitchell.

Contributors to this Edition:



Sharon McCarthy is always up for a good hike. She and her husband Jim moved to Charlotte in 1981. (Combine a Baptist and a Catholic and get two Presbyterians.) They joined Avondale in 1987. They have three children, Megan, Brett, and Laura.



Brandy Lee teaches English at Mallard Creek High School. She's originally from Pittsburgh, but moved to Charlotte to attend Johnson C. Smith University. That's where she met her husband Chris Lee. They have a daughter named Erin Nicole.



Lisa Miller moved from the Midwest to Charlotte in 2006 to work as a reporter for WFAE. She's been a member of Avondale since 2008.



Laura Meier took most of the photographs in Faith Journey. She's A photographer by trade. Check out more of her work at laurajmeier.com. Laura and her husband joined Avondale in 2000. They have two sons Jay and Ben.



Rena White has been a member of Avondale for 18 years. She and her husband Drew were married here. They have two daughters, Grace and Caroline. Rena works as a mental health counselor for Mecklenburg County.



Reverend Chris Lee is the Associate Pastor at Avondale. Chris enjoys spending time with the two most important and beautiful women in his life, his wife Brandy, and his daughter Erin. He also loves food, shoes, sports and Lowe's.