

## EXPLORATIONS

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Phone: 410-366-1851  
 Fax: 410-243-7062  
[www.listeninghearts.org](http://www.listeninghearts.org)  
<http://blog.listeninghearts.org>

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**Prayer in Practice**

**Mike Croghan, Trustee  
 Herndon, VA**

In late winter 2024—later than originally intended after a postponement due to snow—a group of about ten people sat in a circle and prayed at St. Mary’s Chapel within the Church of the Holy Comforter in Vienna, Virginia, with its beautiful stained-glass windows and carved wooden furniture. Our intention was to learn from one another about various prayer practices while practicing several of them, with an underlying hope to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in shared prayer and discussion. Our hopes were richly rewarded.

We structured our time together as a service of Night Prayer or Compline using the liturgy from *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, with a time of Lectio Divina and an open discussion nestled within it like Russian dolls. Many people find the liturgies of the *New Zealand Prayer Book* especially beautiful due to the influence of the island’s indigenous Maori people on its composition. We began with opening prayers and then read Psalm 16 responsively. When we got to the Scripture reading for the evening, Luke 6:27-38, we shifted into Lectio Divina.

Lectio Divina, or just Lectio, is an ancient contemplative spiritual practice. According to the website [bustedhalo.com](http://bustedhalo.com), it was “first introduced by St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-395), and also encouraged by St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-547), the founder of the Benedictine order. It’s a way of developing a closer relationship with God by reflecting prayerfully on His words. In Lectio Divina, the chosen spiritual text is read four times in total, giving an opportunity to think deeply about it and respond thoughtfully.”

We read the passage from Luke aloud the first time, with the instruction to simply listen and let the Word of God flow through us:

*Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Do good and lend, expecting nothing in return; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful as your father is merciful. Judge not and you will not be judged. Condemn not and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you; for the measure you give will be the measure you receive.*

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Then, after a period of silence, we read the passage aloud a second time, listening for a word or phrase that seemed to particularly speak to us. After a third reading, we shared any call from God we might be sensing in the passage. Finally, we read the passage a fourth time, and then sat in a longer period of silence, allowing God's word to soak into our hearts.

Lectio Divina is not one of the practices typically taught by Listening Hearts Ministries, but it is a practice for spiritual discernment: listening carefully, usually in community, for the voice of the Holy Spirit in God's Word. On this occasion, one of our participants, Rod Bosco, described his experience this way:

*Lectio Divina...is intended to offer insight through iterative reflection, with each iteration attempted via a different means. My own experience with it was somewhat like trying to knock down a wall to get to the other side. I dutifully went through each iteration trying to decipher the message I was supposed to glean from the passage (my mind works analytically, which I discovered was holding me back). Consequently, I was getting increasingly frustrated with my inability to "see" the meaning. Then, in the...final iteration, my mind flooded back to a painful event from my childhood that I had long buried. The meaning of the Gospel passage finally connected with me, bringing me to tears and I could feel a sense of healing.*

*It turns out that Gospel passages can be journeys to wisdom unique to our individual experiences and our relationship with God (or perhaps lack thereof). Experiencing the Gospel via Lectio Divina is hard, and it may not always work. But when it does, it can be a heart-opening experience.*

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After our Lectio, we had a time of open sharing in which we talked about our experiences with various spiritual practices, and then we resumed the liturgy of Night Prayer, praying together the gorgeous closing prayers from the *New Zealand Prayer Book*, ending in a final versicle:

**Leader:** *The divine Spirit dwells in us.*

**People:** *Thanks be to God.*

As we parted ways that winter evening, we were able to pray those words with conviction because we had felt the presence of the divine spirit both in our hearts and in our midst. Thanks be to God!

*Mike Croghan is a software engineer and poet and a trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries. He is a cradle Episcopalian who crawled out of the cradle early, went on some adventures (including three years as a practicing Tibetan Buddhist and a long sojourn with the "Emerging Church") and is now once again active in his Episcopal church, the Church of the Holy Comforter in Vienna, Virginia.*

## Intercessory Prayer as Empathy

**Suzanne Farnham, Founder  
Baltimore, MD**

My relationship with God keeps evolving. For years, when I prayed for other people it was primarily mental and verbal. It was a conversation with God in which I did most of the talking—telling God the problem, proposing a solution, invoking God's help.

At some point I came to understand this rational approach as important, but merely the prelude to intercession. Now, for me, the actual

prayer has become an effort to feel the situation of the person for whom I am praying—to share in their pain and need. Totally silent. Wordless. Immersed in God's presence. Bonding with God. Bonding with the person for whom I am praying.

To my surprise, sometimes an insight comes that guides me in a significant way. Always, my relationship with the person for whom I am praying deepens, as does my relationship with God. For me, empathy has become the heart of intercessory prayer.

*Prayer is the burden of a sigh,  
The falling of a tear,  
The upward glancing of an eye  
When none but God is near.*

James Montgomery, 1818  
Published in the 1940 edition  
*THE HYMNAL of the Episcopal Church*, Hymn #419.

*Suzanne Farnham, an Executive Program Associate, the founder of Listening Hearts Ministries, a coauthor of the Listening Hearts series of books, the original architect of the Listening Hearts programs, serves on the Board of Trustees. She has been leading programs from coast to coast for more than thirty years.*



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Listening Hearts Ministries  
provides a range of programs,  
publications, and services that teach  
people the practice of spiritual  
discernment through prayerful listening  
in supportive communities.

*What you seek is seeking you. — Rumi*

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### **holding them in the light**

like a necklace of cold stones  
my worries lay against my chest  
chilling my heart

some were for people dear to me  
some were for those I did not know  
all lay frigid on my flesh

I could not forget any of these concerns  
yet neither could I truly feel them  
I was numb

but outside my window  
the sun's gracious rays shone down  
warming the earth

so I went out  
and lay down on the soft grass  
and held my worries up to the warm  
sunlight

holding them in that holy light  
I and they together were warmed  
and I began to feel them again

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