



# Acts of Mercy as Spiritual Practice

Presented by Barbara Cook

## *Sources in United Methodist Tradition*

### Second General Rule of Methodist Societies

It is expected of all who continue therein (i.e. the Methodist Societies) that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation...by doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as possible, to all men [today, women would be included].

—*The Book of Discipline* 2012, ¶104.

Acts of Mercy were to be

- to human bodies (meeting physical needs)
- to human souls (meeting spiritual needs)
- especially to those of the household of faith (helping fellow Christians in business, buying from them and employing them in preference to others)
- displayed in diligence and frugality

## *Invitation to the Covenant Service*

Christ has many services to be done. Some are more easy and honorable; others are more difficult and disgraceful. Some are suitable to our inclinations and interest; others are contrary to both. In some, we may please Christ and please ourselves. Then there are other works where we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. (*The Book of Worship* [1992], 291)

The instruction in this invitation is based on two levels of Christian maturity: a first level of doing what we are good at and enjoy and a second level of doing what clearly needs to be done whether we have particular gifts for it or not and whether we enjoy it or not. Acts of mercy as a spiritual practice will include deeds on both levels.

## *Practicing Acts of Mercy*

An “umbrella” spiritual discipline under which one can work on acts of mercy is the tithe—both of money and of time. A tithe of money to the church and other nonprofit organizations meets the physical and spiritual needs of people. A tithe of time does the same thing. Begin by taking an inventory of where you are now. Deliberately plan to add a step toward the tithe in money, time or both if you’re not there now. If you are already at a tithe of both money and time, reflect on which first step beyond the tithe you will take.

A Resource: Kenneth Carder, *Living Our Beliefs* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2009).



## Acts of Piety as Spiritual Practice

Presented by Lucinda Alwa

### *Third General Rule of Methodist Societies*

"It is therefore expected of all who continue [in Methodist Societies] that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation . . . by attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are:

The public worship of God	Family and private prayer
The Ministry of the Word	Searching the Scriptures
The Supper of the Lord	Fasting or abstinence

—*The Book of Discipline*, 2012, ¶104

To attend upon these "ordinances of God" is to engage in *Acts of Piety*. In his book, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*, Bishop Rueben P. Job distills Wesley's General Rules into three *simple* rules: 1. Do No Harm; 2. Do Good; 3. Stay in Love with God (p. 10). Bishop Job expresses Wesley's third General Rule, concerned with acts of piety, as staying in love with God.

### *Acts of Piety help us to stay in love with God.*

When we read the Bible, pray, worship, fast, or receive Holy Communion, we are engaging in acts that keep us in love with God. Wesley considered these acts to be "Means of Grace": communal and individual actions that challenge and nurture us in living relationship with God. In Wesley's words, "By means of grace I understand outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God and appointed for this end . . . to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to [us] preventing, justifying and sanctifying grace" (*Sermon 16, The Means of Grace vol. 5, p. 197*).

God offers grace freely to everyone, but we need to make use of the "means of grace" in order to become truly receptive to Christ's saving power. Means of grace—acts of piety—give us access to God's living presence in the world and in our hearts.

### *Practicing Acts of Piety*

- Be aware of your personal inclinations—the ways in which you sense God's presence most strongly. Is it in reading Scripture, in spoken prayer, silent prayer, worship, fasting, Communion? Make it a point to practice regularly, daily if possible, the acts to which you are drawn— they are a gift of joy.
- Be aware of your areas of resistance—the acts that you may not "resonate" with. Would you rather pray than read Scripture? Vice versa? Do some acts seem to be "mere rituals"? Make it a point to practice the acts that you resist with intention and some regularity. Gradually you may find that such acts are what have been missing in your life! Allow God to lead and feed you in new ways!
- Remember that these acts are means, and not ends. We do not have to earn God's love. But God truly wants us to know this love. "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you" (Jas 4:8).

A Resource: Rueben P. Job, *A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).



## “Circle of Trust” Touchstones

Presented by Barbara Cook

What happens in a Circle of Trust—grounded in honoring the identity and integrity of each participant—flows out into the world as an authentic source of personal and societal healing and a power for positive social change.

- Be present as fully as possible. Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.
- What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand. This is not a “share or die” event! During this retreat, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.
- Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth. Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using “I” statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.
- No fixing, saving, advising or correcting each other. This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the “helping professions.” But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.
- Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions, we help “hear each other into deeper speech.”
- When the going gets rough, turn to wonder. If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, “I wonder what brought her to this belief?” “I wonder what he's feeling right now?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?” Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.
- Attend to your own inner teacher. We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.
- Trust and learn from the silence. Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.
- Observe deep confidentiality. Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.
- Know that it's possible to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

Taken from: <http://www.couragerenewal.org/touchstones/>



# Prayer from a Contemplative's Perspective

Presented by **Thad Rutter**

Just as God's love is a many splendored thing, so are the approaches to prayer that God gives to people of faith. The one God has given me is contemplative; therefore what follows comes from that perspective. To attempt to convey something different about prayer is foolish. Offered below are certain understandings and methods that have been important to me. I write with the hope that what is presented will enhance your understanding and experience of prayer whatever your approach. —Thad Rutter

## *Understandings of Prayer as a Contemplative*

- The source of prayer is not us but the Spirit working in us.
- Prayer is a mysterious gift made known to us through our faith and commitment to Jesus Christ and his Spirit.
- Prayer is not about "knowing the right thing" but comes as a desire in us to seek and listen to the Spirit in whatever way the Spirit reaches us.
- When we pray regularly, the Spirit will gradually shift our outlook and focus away from our ego's concerns to focus upon Christ's indwelling love and a desire to share that love.
- At heart, prayer is about helping us to grow closer to God, others, and ourselves in the love of the Spirit.

## *Helpful Resources and Methods*

- Breathe: Taking time to focus on our breathing as we breathe from our abdomens can attune us to the Spirit. Focusing upon a scripture verse or phrase such as "God be with me" enriches what is called "Breath Prayers."
- Read Scripture as Prayer: Learning to read scripture in a meditative, prayerful way can draw us into the Spirit's work in us. Simply, first let a verse hit you as you read. Read again and see what thoughts and feelings emerge. Read a third time and ponder what God may be saying to you.
- Read Devotional Books: Two devotional resources I highly recommend are *Soul Feast* by Marjorie Thompson, an overview of and practical guide to prayer approaches; and *A Guide to Prayer for All who Seek God* by Norman Shawchuck and Reuben Job. It contains daily scripture readings and rich spiritual writings.
- Involve the body in prayer: Many people involved their bodies in prayer through yoga. Others walk in nature or run.
- Pray with others: Participate in a spiritual formation group and cultivate spiritual friendships with people.

## *A Final Thought*

The preceding are what I call intentional approaches to prayer. Since prayer is of the Spirit, and the Spirit is everywhere, we can have prayer happening "anywhere"—that is, at a movie, an art museum, a dinner conversation, a hospital room, and so on. The key is trusting that the Spirit wants to reach us and learning to pay attention and be open.



Acts of Piety / Acts of Mercy  
Spiritual Practices of Wisconsin United Methodists

## Studying Scripture

Presented by Kate Croskery-Jones

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures —Luke 24:44-45 (NRSV)

### Resources

- Online: [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) and [www.biblehub.com](http://www.biblehub.com) contain many different Bible translations as well as search tools and parallel features to look at different translations side by side.
- Buying a Bible: As a *first* Bible, select a study Bible with references. Parallel Bibles and modern rendering such as The Message, Voice, Living, Good News are good *second* Bibles. Most important; get one you will use!
- Added Features: Concordance, maps, timelines, Bible dictionary, study notes and footnotes (Read them!), commentaries

### Practicing Study

- Study with Others, especially those with difference world views, different life experiences (always respectfully; even very learned people don't always agree on a single interpretation)
- Follow a Reading Plans: Many are available online (e.g., [www.biblestudytools.com](http://www.biblestudytools.com)). Find others in studies such as *Disciple* or *Covenant*. Trying to read the Bible straight through in a year can be done. It is very difficult, just to start at Genesis and read straight through 1/365 each day. Remember: reading the Bible and studying the Bible are not the same thing. Generally, the Bible is not to be read as though it were a novel, a Facebook post or a newspaper.

### The 5-K Method

This works with books, chapters, passages, or individual verses.

- **Know the words**: make sure you understand all the vocabulary.
- **Know what someone smarter than you says**: read commentaries, see what they say about the Scripture.
- **Know what the verse says to you**: how does the Scripture apply to you?
- **Know the verse**: end with the memorization of Scripture. The beauty of this study is that it can be expanded to fit your needs.
- **Know the context**: Who wrote it? To whom was it written? What circumstances were surrounding the author and the audience?



### ***Lectio Divina: Praying the Scriptures***

*Lectio Divina*, a Latin term, means "divine reading" and describes a way of reading the Scriptures whereby we gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us. In the 12th century, a Carthusian monk called Guigo, described the stages he saw as essential to the practice of *Lectio Divina*. There are various ways of practicing *Lectio Divina* either individually or in groups but Guigo's description remains fundamental.

- The first stage is *lectio* (reading) where we read the Word of God, slowly and reflectively so that it sinks into us. Any passage of Scripture can be used for this way of prayer but the passage should not be too long.
- The second stage is *meditatio* (reflection) where we think about the text we have chosen and ruminate upon it so that we take from it what God wants to give us.
- The third stage is *oratio* (response) where we leave our thinking aside and simply let our hearts speak to God. This response is inspired by our reflection on the Word of God.
- The final stage of *Lectio Divina* is *contemplatio* (rest) where we let go not only of our own ideas, plans and meditations but also of our holy words and thoughts. We simply rest in the Word of God. We listen at the deepest level of our being to God who speaks within us with a still small voice. As we listen, we are gradually transformed from within. Obviously, this transformation will have a profound effect on the way we actually live and the way we live is the test of the authenticity of our prayer. We must take what we read in the Word of God into our daily lives. <http://ocarm.org/en/content/lectio/what-lectio-divina>

These stages of *Lectio Divina* are not fixed rules of procedure but simply guidelines as to how the prayer normally develops. Its natural movement is toward greater simplicity, with less and less talking and more listening. Gradually the words of Scripture begin to dissolve and the Word is revealed before the eyes of our heart. How much time should be given to each stage depends very much on whether it is used individually or in a group. If *Lectio Divina* is used for group prayer, obviously more structure is needed than for individual use. In group prayer, much will depend on the type of group. *Lectio Divina* may involve discussing the implications of the Word of God for daily life but it cannot be reduced to this. The movement of the prayer is toward silence. If the group is comfortable with silence, more time could be spent resting in the Word. Several templates for group *Lectio Divina* are available.



## Holy Communion in Song

Presented by Amy Anderson

Holy Communion is a sacrament. In a sacrament, God uses common elements—in this case, bread and juice—as means or vehicles of divine grace. Holy Communion is a gift of God through the grace of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Holy Communion is one of the two designated special means through which divine grace comes to us. The sharing and bonding experienced at the Table exemplifies the nature of the church and models the world, as God would have it be.

—Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville: The General Board of Discipleship, 2004), 18.

Coming to the Lord's Table to share a meal, is a gesture that denotes the longing for repentance and reconciliation. When this meal is facilitated with verse and lyric, a sense of intimacy lingers. Recruit members of your family, congregation, or friends to share their gift of song with your faith community.

### *Practicing Holy Communion in Song*

The following directions offer a sung Holy Communion with the congregation in echo to worship leaders. Note: UMH=*United Methodist Hymnal*; TFWS=*The Faith We Sing*.

- Invitation and Directions—UMH page 13 (spoken).
- Communion Setting—TFWS 2257-a (sing responsively).
- Thanksgiving to God, "It is right . . ."—UMH page 13 (spoken by worship leader).
- Sanctus—TFWS 2257-b (sing together).
- Thanksgiving for Christ's Redemptive Work, "Holy are you, and blessed . . ."—UMH page 13–14 (spoken by worship leader).
- Memorial Acclamation—TFWS 2257-c (sing together)
- Invocation of the Holy Spirit, "Pour out your Holy . . ."—UMH page 14 (spoken by worship leader)
- Great Amen—TFWS 2257-d (sing together)
- Invitation to the Lord's Prayer "And now, with . . ."—UMH page 14 (spoken by worship leader)
- The Lord's Prayer—TFWS 2278 (sing as one/many echo)
- Breaking the Bread or Words of Institution—(done by elder or licensed local pastor)
- Giving the Bread and Cup—(by intinction)
- Prayer after Communion—UMH page 11 (spoken by worship leader or in unison)

Worship God by coming to the Lord's Table. Be in ministry with the pianist, vocalist, pastor, and the congregation. Altogether, one voice, in song.

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, one voice, for we all partake of the one loaf. The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ. . . . The cup over which we give thanks is a sharing in the blood of Christ.

—*The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 11.

A Resource: Robin Knowles Wallace, *Communion Services* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).



# Fasting

Presented by Barbara Dick

"When you fast . . ." (Matt. 6:16). Jesus assumes that people will fast and offers instruction on how to do it.

John Wesley . . . urged early Methodists to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. He felt so strongly about this matter, in fact, that he refused to ordain anyone to the Methodist ministry who did not fast on these two days.

—Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 51.

In his classic text on spiritual practice, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster shares that fasting in the Bible "refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes" (p.48). He differentiates between spiritual fasting and political hunger strikes or fasting to lose weight. He suggests beginning with a partial fast for twenty-four hours and progressing to fasts of several-days' duration.

Whether you fast from food or from some other habitual practice that steals your attention from God, begin gradually. Experiment with different kinds of fasts, for example: particular food or drink (coffee, soda, alcohol), all food, screens (TV, computer, phone, e-readers, games), smoking or sexual activity. Try fasting for an evening, for a day, or for longer periods from particular activities or substances. Then try again. . . .

Try fasting with a buddy or small group. You will find that the more you practice the discipline of fasting, the more benefit you will derive from it.

## ***Practicing Fasting: Sacrifice . . .***

- **As Experiment:** This is trying it on for the first time; finding a rhythm or pattern that works brings a sense of adventure and satisfaction.
- **In Want:** At first, denial will evoke feelings of "want"—grumbling tummies, longing for the activity, a sense of loss.
- **As Discipline:** Repeated observation of a fast offers a feeling of accomplishment and pride.
- **As Opportunity:** As you grow in the discipline of fasting, the experience can become an opportunity to learn about yourself as you observe your responses to hunger or denial.
- **As Solidarity:** A fast entered in partnership with or service of a population in need offers a sense of solidarity with those who suffer. It is helpful to donate the funds you would normally spend on food or activities.
- **As Joy:** Finally, denial can be experienced as true joy. As we focus more fully on God, we begin to understand that we are already filled with all that we need. Food or denied activities then become means of enjoying the fullness of God's abundance, rather than the means for filling our empty places.

Fasting reminds us that we are sustained "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Food does not sustain us; God sustains us. In Christ, "All things hold together" (Col. 1:17). Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the world of God. Fasting is feasting!

—*Celebration of Discipline*, 55.