

# Dance as Prayer



The Rev. Danáe Ashley, Presenter

## Presentation:

1. Gather together in your chosen worship space to pray. We are often in a hurry, so we will open up with a prayer that encourages us to slow down, especially as we listen and respond to our bodies in prayer. Using our bodies in prayer will help us be more mindful and intentional of the prayers we are using.

*Officiant:* Let the whole earth be joyful in you, O God,

*People:* **Greet you with gladness,  
And celebrate your presence with a song.**

For we know that you are creating us,

**You are alive in us and we belong to you.**

You are weaving us into a marvelous tapestry,

**a people of diverse threads and colours.**

We enter your gates, a motley procession,

**With heartfelt thanksgiving and joy.**

We dance with delight and bless one another,

**In the Spirit of your love, intimate and just.**

For you are gracious and courteous,

Compassionate in embrace,

**Faithful through all generations. Amen.**

(From: *Out of the Silence...Prayer's Daily Round* by: Jim Cotter and Paul Payton)

- In this responsorial prayer, what sort of images jump out to you? What sort of movement from your body do they inspire, if any?
2. Go over Boundaries
    - a. We are free to participate as much or as little as we want in each activity.
    - b. We will approach each activity in a way that takes the pressure off us to produce something "creative". The process will be more important than the product.
    - c. In the times of sharing, we are free to share as much or little as we wish. We don't comment on another person's work unless invited to do so. We commit to being as compassionate and generous toward our own work as we can be.
    - d. Everything that is shared here is confidential.
    - e. You are going to be doing some physical movement. Liturgical dance is not about becoming a ballerina, but moving your being in response to God. This type of dance is not a performance, but prayer. The physical movement is your prayer. Remember, you can participate as much as or as little as you wish.

- f. Ask if anyone feels uncomfortable or has questions.
3. Dancing in Scripture and Tradition
- a. The whole of creation has been envisioned as the dance of God. Dance is a part of many cultures, especially in marking different passages in life: birth, adulthood, marriage, fertility, the harvest, and death. Our rituals in church are expressions of dance. We kneel, we stand, we make the sign of the cross, we walk up to receive the Bread and the Wine. All are liturgical movements that express our communion with God. Our physical movements reveal what is going on inside of us. Our spirits and our bodies are intertwined—we express our love for God with our whole beings, not just with our mind. Our bodies “should not be seen as sinful or worthy only of discipline but rather as temples of the Holy Spirit and therefore the natural vehicles of the soul expressing itself outwardly through the body.”<sup>1</sup>
  - b. In Scripture there are many instances of dancing and movement. For example, in Genesis 1:2, “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters,” and in Exodus 15:20, Miriam led the women with tambourines and dancing, praising God. And let’s not forget David in 2 Samuel 6:5, 15, dancing “with all his might” or many of the Psalms which speak of dancing before the Lord, “Let them praise his name with dancing” (Psalm 149:3).
  - c. The early church developed the idea of the “ring-dance of the angels,” in which they would praise God through doing a dance together in a circle. This was carried on into the Middle Ages.
4. Getting comfortable with movement<sup>2</sup>
- a. Ask the participants to sit somewhere they feel comfortable and have enough room to move their arms and legs, if desired, during this meditation.
  - b. Have them close their eyes and feel the natural rhythm of their breathing.
    - i. Read Genesis 2:7 “Then the Lord God formed human kind from the dust of the ground, and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.”
    - ii. Feel the breath of God moving in your body. Remember that God is always with you.
    - iii. Relax and picture around you a symbol of God’s energizing and healing presence. This could be light, a color, the wind, or whatever works for you.
    - iv. Listen to any signals from your body of physical discomfort. If you feel something uncomfortable in your body, focus on that part and feel it breathing in your body as a separate entity. Now, visualize God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Brendan O’Malley. *Lord of Creation*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2008, p. 45

<sup>2</sup> These exercises are taken and paraphrased from Carla De Sola’s book *The Spirit Moves*, Flora Slosson Wuellner’s book *Prayer and Our Bodies*, as well as my own experience.

surrounding light flowing in and out of that area, and when you feel ready, move on to the next part of your body.

- v. When you are done, let your whole body sit quietly and lean on the strength and presence of God, letting the breath of God move through your wonderfully created body.
- vi. Give thanks to God for creating you. Open your eyes, if you wish.
- c. Now, close your eyes so that we remain private, and keep in mind that you only need to participate if it feels safe to you, allow your body to express whatever seems natural in response to the following words:  
Joy...Fear...Grieving...Guilt...Peace...Praise...Loneliness... Love.
- d. Slowly come back and open your eyes when you are ready.
  - i. Ask if anyone would like to share how that experience was for them.  
Brief sharing.

#### 5. The Lord's Prayer

- a. Observe how you feel when we say the Lord's Prayer together and you have your arms and legs crossed.
- b. Observe how you feel when we say the Lord's Prayer kneeling or sitting (as able) and opening up our hands.
- c. Do you notice how our "whole personal response to God's love is deepened when the body is allowed to be a guide and partner in prayer rather than a hindrance to it" (Wuellner, 58)?
- d. Ask if anyone would like share how this experience was for them. Brief sharing.

#### 6. Movement with Scripture

- a. Ask those that wish to come and form a circle near or around the altar.
- b. Meditation from *The Spirit Moves: Handbook of Dance and Prayer* by: Carla De Sola



- i. Stand in the circle, facing each other, and close your eyes.
- ii. "Be aware of your breath...All of life is in motion, yet there is 'the still point.' Find that still point within you. It is from there that your movements will come. It is from your still point that your movements will be a dialogue with God—your heart united with his; your hands moving, talking, in [God's] space. Feel the presence of God in the space around you." (19)
- iii. " 'I will lift up my hands and call on thy name' (Psalm 63). Slowly lift your hands in a wordless dialogue with God." (19)
- iv. " 'Then [Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them' (Luke 24:50). Lift your hands again, with your palms facing upward. After they are lifted, slowly turn your palms face downward and lower your arms. Pretend you are blessing someone, placing your hands on her head. How do your hands feel? Do you sense warmth and a kind of gentle energy in them?" (19)



- v. “Bring your right hand toward your heart and slightly bend over, rounding your upper body. Now move your hand up and out, straightening your torso at the same time, wordlessly offering yourself to God. Repeat the gesture: in to the heart and out, in and out, moving a little faster each time, until you are joyfully extending yourself.” (20)
  - vi. ““Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting of my hands as an evening sacrifice!” (Psalm 141). Incense slowly turns and twists as it curls upward. Lift your hands upward as if they were one column of incense, and create a flowing, turning, moving prayer. Stop when your hands are at a comfortable height. Feel the stillness, the shape of your hands.” (20)
  - vii. Lower your hands and breath deeply. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes.
  - viii. Ask if anyone would like to share how that experience was for them. Brief sharing.
7. Creating your own movement to Scripture
- a. Divide the participants into groups
  - b. Have them select one of the poems or scriptures to use to create their own prayer movement. It can be a portion or the whole thing.
  - c. Have them practice for about 15 minutes and then come together as a group and share.
8. Closing
- a. Listen and respond to any other questions or comments.
  - b. Teach the Doxology as our closing prayer. See copy of Carla De Sola’s movements (under “A table blessing”) below (131).
    - i. *Praise God from whom all blessings flow.* All extend hands toward the table/altar.
    - ii. *Praise God all creatures here below.* All join hands around the table.
    - iii. *Praise God above, ye heavenly host.* All raise hands high, heads lifted.
    - iv. *Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.* All lower arms, hands still joined, and bow.
    - v. *Amen.* All straighten from bow and take steps forward toward the center of the circle, hands still joined, bringing arms up and holding for the end.