

How to pray with your bodies

BY GRACE JI-SUN KIM

I grew up praying with my lip, through words. When my three kids were still young, we would pray together before bedtime. This was our ritual. We would clasp our hands together as I taught them basic prayers. Our bodies were involved as I would often tell them to kneel, bow their heads and close their eyes when we prayed. Body posture is important when we pray. It becomes part of our prayer.

In the Old Testament, we find that "David danced before the Lord with all his might;" (2 Samuel 6:14-22a) as he used his body to praise the Lord. This and other stories remind us that body is essential to worship and prayer. In a way that echoes David's uninhibited dance of praise, body prayer helps us become more fully engaged in prayer as we connect with God using more than words. Practicing body prayer will open our lives more fully to God and allow our entire selves to enter into communion with God. Body prayer goes deeper than words. When words fail, praying with our bodies can draw us closer to God.

The importance of body prayer

When we have been taught to pray with just our words, too often prayer becomes an intellectual exercise. In many churches, we recite prayers in unison during worship with little thought to the words and the prayers. They become a mechanical ritual. If we are to pray with all we have, we must explore how our body can participate in prayer.

Body prayer may sound foreign to some Christians as we've been told our soul is good, but our bodies are bad. This dualistic thinking comes from Greco-Roman philosophy which entered into Christianity early in the life of the church and remains prevalent today. Dualism separates items and concepts into two categories. With this historically negative view of the body, Christians often resist the idea of using our bodies during worship and prayer.

Body prayer tries to eliminate the dualistic frame of mind. It reminds us that the body, created by God, is good and that we need to engage our whole body in prayer.

How to lead a body prayer with young people

In body prayer, we treat our bodies as importantly as we treat our minds. We incorporate both our minds and our bodies as we turn to God. Body prayer can be done in different ways. One easy form of body prayer is using "prayer walking" to communicate with God. It can be done alone or in a group and it can be done anywhere. We can pray as we walk between our classes or while we are in a park. Body prayer can include a form of pilgrimage, walking the Stations of the Cross or a labyrinth.

Body prayer is not new, and Christians and mystics have practiced it for some time. Julian of Norwich (1343–1416) suffered severe body pain and it was during her illness that she received the visions that she wrote about in *Revelations of Divine Love*. She believed that if she welcomed her body's sensations with openness, then she could open herself to the presence of God in a way that is less mediated by the mind. Julian wrote, "The fruit and the purpose of prayer is to be "oned" with and like God in all things." She said that we should take a few minutes to let our heart and mind's attention sink deep into our body, to remember our being's inherent oneness. She used simple body postures to pray to God.

Below are the words from the Motto of the Order of Julian of Norwich which you can follow to begin body prayer:

- ✘ **AWAIT** (*hands at waist, cupped up to receive*): Await God's presence, not as you expect, hope, or imagine, but just as it is in this moment.
- ✘ **ALLOW** (*open your cupped hands and circle your hand upwards to reach up, look up toward the sky as you do*): Allow a sense of God's presence (or not) to come and be what it is, without imposing your expectations.
- ✘ **ACCEPT** (*lower both hands and place them at your heart, cupped towards body*): Accept as a gift whatever comes or does not come. Accept that you are not in charge. Accept the infinity of God present with you whether or not you are aware of it or not.
- ✘ **ATTEND** (*slowly stretch your hands in front of you and then slightly move them towards the side, ready to be responsive*): Attend to what you are called to, actions that God invites you to from this stance of openness.

These four steps can be repeated as many times as desired and needed.

When we pray, we open ourselves up to a place of healing and wholeness. When we pray, we do so not because we ask something of God but rather, to put ourselves right into God's hands, free at God's disposition, vulnerable, listening to the Divine voice which speaks to our most honest self.

We can try some simple movements as we pray such as bowing our heads, kneeling, folding our hands, all of which we are used to. Such simple movements draw us closer to God. In addition, practicing body prayer reminds us that our bodies are good.

Body prayer involves all of who we are as we pray to God. When we march in the streets in protest, we are praying with our bodies. When we are using our hands, arms, legs, feet, and lips to pray to God, we are engaging in body prayer, which has the power to heal, restore, and transform.

Practical Resources:

Roy DeLeon, *Praying with the Body: Bringing the Psalms to Life* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009).

Doug Pagitt, *Body Prayer: The Posture of Intimacy with God* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2005)