

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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A Prayer Fugue: Prayer in Community

Meg Kimble
Annapolis, MD

This summer my son wrote to me about an experience he had while traveling in South Africa. He was staying at a university with other students while doing research on restitution of tribal land. Ned often took a walk around the campus before the evening meal and would frequently see students praying as the sun was setting. One late afternoon Ned was walking with friends and they came upon two young South African women standing together on a hill overlooking the university. The young women asked the American students if they were Christians and then invited them to pray with them. The girls said shyly that they usually began by singing a hymn. After some discussion, they determined that one hymn everyone knew was "Amazing Grace." After singing the hymn, they held hands and began to pray, first silently, then aloud, giving thanks. Ned wrote, "We had this amazing dynamic prayer fugue of sorts, everyone just singing and praising God with their whole hearts, and then we all ended on a big 'Amen!' and hugged."



In music, a fugue opens with one main theme followed by many other voices, each first imitating the theme, then offering variations upon variations until finally all return to the original. Listening to music is one of my greatest joys. I recently had the pleasure of hearing a famous organist perform Bach's *Art of Fugue* on a marvelous instrument. When the audience rose to their feet applauding, the performer did something I had never seen before. She slid from the organ bench and stood lifting the score above her head pointing to Bach's name as if to remind us all who really deserved the praise. A few weeks later I heard the same masterpiece performed, but this time another musician played some parts on the organ, others on the piano, and some on the harpsichord. I listened to the familiar music with fresh appreciation.

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Waiting . . . and Waiting . . . and Waiting

**Thomas Wilson
Chula Vista, CA**

Waiting is an essential element of the Listening Hearts discernment process. The discernment group settles in, prays, and listens to the focus person describe a concern, then waits . . . waits for a word, an image, or a sensation. We hope for clarity as we patiently wait upon the Lord, wait for the presence of the Spirit to become known to us. We wait in humility, holding lightly what we think God might be saying, to allow God to speak to us in new ways. We wait, reflect, and tentatively probe areas that might help shed light. Sometimes we wish that we could see the light pointing in a specific direction, but we are trained . . . and we believe . . . that it is not ours alone to find the path. We share a glimpse, we ask “what if,” we blink in the flash of an insight, and then we ponder some more. As a group, we wait in hope, much like the Israelites waited for the Messiah.

This type of waiting is not a passive state. It requires attentiveness, patience, and quietude. Impatient waiting can lead to physical and psychological problems, while patient waiting seems to have positive effects (calmness, insight, lowered blood pressure). Patient waiting also requires us to give up personal control and to provide time and space for reflection on what God may be doing in our lives. Attentive waiting asks us to get outside of our busy world, put our deadlines in perspective, and trust that God will lead us. We experience the power of attentive, patient waiting when we participate in centering prayer or contemplation, or when on retreat; we step outside our normal routine and allow ourselves to be immersed in a different reality. We give ourselves over to our loving God, who calls us and nurtures us and challenges us to be faithful witnesses.

Waiting gives us space to ponder and reflect, and gives God space to take part in the conversation. It enhances the possibility of our experiencing God. Times of silence and waiting can help us deepen and broaden our understanding of who God is, what God is asking of us, what new things God has to say.

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space to take part in the conversation.*

Waiting is not a virtue prized by twenty-first-century Americans. We have been programmed to expect results, right now—fast foods, cell phones, 24/7 availability of all sorts of things. When we open ourselves to the possibility of waiting and silence, we become countercultural; we allow God’s time to become our time. Even when we find ourselves forced to wait, we can embrace that experience and use it to become attentive to God in our midst. For instance, if we are in a checkout line that seems to be moving at a snail’s pace, we can get beyond how this is affecting our plans and become attentive to those around us and pray for them. Or, when we don’t get an immediate response to our instant message, rather than becoming frustrated, we can prayerfully wait, with the understanding that that person may be focused on someone more important than we are.

Whenever we find ourselves waiting, with our patience growing thin, we can remember that this is an opportunity to be open to the presence of God. Welcome the moment.

The Rev. Thomas Wilson is a member of the Listening Hearts ministry at St. Paul’s Episcopal Cathedral in the Diocese of San Diego. Recently ordained as a transitional deacon, Tom now serves at All Souls Episcopal Church in San Diego.

The Holy Spirit Moving in Community

Carolyn Miller
Austin, TX

Every Monday morning at St. David's Episcopal Church, Austin, TX, forty homeless women line up to attend Woman 2 Woman, a special program featuring breakfast, devotions, and clothes shopping. The women come from all walks of life, bringing with them mental illness, alcoholism, drug and sexual abuse, and other related mental and physical health problems. Many live in the woods, in half-way houses, or in community shelters. Some have families; some do not.

After breakfast, devotions are led by one of the ten volunteers and last about five minutes. As one may imagine, with such a disparate group, keeping their attention and focus can often be difficult. The room is a mixture of women shouting, some hyperactive, some coming off a bout of drunkenness, some depressed, some going through a de-tox regimen, and many who are tired, feeling hopeless, sad, and often physically hurting. Despite the uneven atmosphere, we find that the devotional time sets a tone of calm and acceptance for the rest of the morning. The Holy Spirit is indeed moving in this community.

One time as devotions leader I introduced the women to a quote from Esther de Waal: "To listen closely, with every fiber of our being, at every moment of the day, is one of the most difficult things in the world, and yet it is essential if we mean to find the God whom we are seeking."

Each time I lead the devotions, I start by talking about the importance of listening with our hearts, which means getting quiet, getting centered, and especially being aware that each person in the room should be treated with dignity and respect.

Each time I lead the devotions, I start by talking about the importance of listening with our hearts, which means getting quiet, getting centered, and especially being aware that each person in the room should be treated with dignity and respect. By God's grace, the women begin to settle down, calm themselves, and engage in listening to the Scripture selection for the day. Many of the women live by Scripture; they know their Bible. Often at the end of devotions we ask them to share with the group their experience with God. Sometimes they pray, sometimes they sing, sometimes they talk about being thankful for things such as "waking up," "being out of jail," "finding my children," "our Lord Jesus and Savior," "prayer," "city services," "ninety days clean." When one of the women is sharing her spiritual experience, everyone listens intently. The listening process thus becomes a reciprocal one for all of us. The Holy Spirit does move in this community.

My experience in working with Listening Hearts Ministries is paying off in a myriad of ways, not the least of which is tangible evidence of God's presence in this complex community of women. Even so, we have to start from scratch at every meeting. This experience is reflected in a monk's response to the question "What do you do there in the monastery?" The monk replied, "We fall down and get up, fall down and get up, fall down and get up again." In God, every day we begin anew.

Carolyn Miller, educational consultant, is a member of the Board of Trustees for Listening Hearts Ministries.

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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.

When people turn to Scripture and use it to reflect on how they conduct their lives, they open up a major channel for discernment.

—Grounded in God, p. 51

A Prayer Fugue... *(continued from page 1)*

The authors of *Listening Hearts* remind us that “prayer, especially prayer for discernment, involves listening.” They also remind us that Christian community is important in discerning God’s call. The early Christian theologian Tertullian said that a single Christian is no Christian. We are called to live in community and to live in communion with one another, even those with whom we differ. Listening to a musical fugue is fascinating and challenging because of the many variations that together create the musical composition. Saint Paul tells us that it is the very differences in our spiritual gifts that make us the Body of Christ. Like the art of fugue, our prayer in community involves listening for each other’s voices and, together, listening for the voice of God.

I thought again of the young South African students and their fugue of prayer as I witnessed the consecration of the new Bishop of Maryland, the Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton, at the National Cathedral. As the ordaining bishops gathered around preparing to lay their hands on Eugene, the organ began to play a quiet low melody. A brass quartet added harmony, still playing very quietly. The choir began the chant “Veni Creator Spiritus,” the hymn rising in a slow crescendo to a thundering sound and then gradually fading away into silence as the great cathedral overflowed with prayer. Many voices in communion, all listening, one in prayer. Come, Holy Spirit Creator. Amen.

South African Sunset photo on page 1 by Ned Kimble