

In the realm of the counterintuitive, the king is, in my opinion, Centering Prayer. This prayer practice is not about “talking to God”, and not about “listening to God” either. In fact, Centering Prayer is not about communicating at all. It is about being.

When a couple begins to date, they are simply attracted to one another. So they begin to communicate to see if there is more to the relationship than just physical attraction. They soon find that the other person is “easy to talk to” and shares a lot of the same interests, habits, and often experiences. This is an important step in the relationship, but not the last. After a long time together, the couple finds that, as easy as the other is to talk to, they don’t need to talk at all. When a relationship is really strong, just being in each other’s presence is pleasure enough. Sure, they still talk sometimes, but they don’t have to, and often don’t.

This is the best metaphor I’ve found for Centering Prayer. The practice is to find a quiet place and sit in a comfortable position. Decide on a word you will use as a tool to bring you back out of distraction and into the Presence of God. Try something like “peace” or “Abba” or “still” or “hush”. Then, you sit quietly and try to just BE with God without speaking to Him, imagining about Him, or trying to listen to Him. Just sit quietly, empty your mind of distractions, and BE. Anyone who has tried such a thing before will know that the minute you try to get rid of any distracting thoughts that might draw you away from just being with God, it’s like an invitation to distracting thoughts. And the more you try to ignore them, the more incessant and insistent they become. This is where the word you chose before comes in. When you find yourself distracted, you just say the word and let it bring you back to a stillness before God. When distractions come again, you say the word again and return to God. And again. And again.

The true difficulty of Centering Prayer is twofold: first resistance and then endurance. Especially in the Evangelical realm, we resist Centering prayer. We have been taught that prayer means to talk... constantly. And then we begin to learn that prayer is to listen.. attentively. But whichever way you go, prayer is an activity, what we call Kataphatic or active. In fact, often we go so far as to teach the opposite, Apophatic or inactive prayer, as wrong. We call it “Eastern” or “New Age”. A friend told me that sitting empty before God “welcomes all kinds of evil spirits in. The bible says so!” We resist the idea that even if we don’t act, we can still grow in relationship with God. We have to get over this need for control, even in our own prayer life.

The other difficulty is endurance. To sit for 20 minutes trying constantly to quiet the distractions in our minds quickly frustrates and eventually defeats us. We feel like we’ve failed at prayer, and that is not allowed in our theology. So we give up, usually saying, “this just isn’t for me” or “I don’t see the point”. I’ve been helped in this by a friend who showed me that since turning to God once gladdens His heart, turning to God 1000 in 20 minutes would make Him ecstatic! Every time we get distracted and use our word to turn back to God’s presence, it is a victory, not a failure. I have experienced this with my 5 year old son, who gets distracted very easily. When he returns his attention to me, I’m not angry, I don’t scold. I’m so happy to have him back. And so it is with God.

Let me encourage you to try Centering Prayer a few times. Notice what happens inside you, your resistances, and your discouragement. See how hard it is to quiet yourself, and then let that teach you about the noise in our minds and souls, noise that so easily distracts us from God’s presence every minute.