

## **Ash Wednesday Sermon**

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

My reserved German heritage family really took these words to heart! Growing up my family rarely prayed out loud; even though we were very active in our church. The only prayer I remember saying out loud was, “Now I lay me down to sleep,” at night. The other time a prayer was said out loud was the grace prayed at family holiday meals and that was voiced by one of my grandparents because we children we too uncomfortable to say a prayer out loud.

I have a feeling that many of you grew up the same way and would feel very uncomfortable if I were to ask you to say a prayer out loud either for yourself or for someone else. I believe that most of us feel anxious about praying out loud first because we haven’t had the practice and secondly because we believe we need to have fancy, religious words and postures before we can pray to God.

But there isn’t just one way to pray. God accepts and hears all forms of prayer. And you don’t need to have big, fancy words to pray. Prayer is about being honest with God. Tell God what is really on your mind and in your heart; sometimes that honesty needs to be spoken out loud. What is powerful about prayer is that we care enough about the other to pray for and with them.

During the summer of my first year in seminary we students work for 12 weeks as chaplains in either hospital or nursing home settings. I was in a large hospital in St. Joseph Missouri. We had to set learning goals for ourselves to work on while we were there. Because of my reluctance to pray out loud I decided to work on feeling more comfortable with it. While there I put into practice what my supervisor called praying the conversation. In this practice one pays attention to the needs, fears, joys or thanks that the patient brings up in your conversation with them.

This practice helped me in a couple of ways. First it helped me to stay focused on the patient and our conversation; my mind didn't wander as much. Secondly, it helped my anxiety with praying out loud because I now had topics for my prayer. This also helped the patient because they felt like someone had really listened to them.

I'm still not totally comfortable about praying out loud, but I'm getting better and the more practice I get at doing it the easier it becomes. So the next time you're talking with family or friends and they mention something joyous or troubling; ask them if you might pray with them and for them. It doesn't have to be long. It doesn't have to be fancy. It just needs to be honest and heartfelt. It won't be easy at first, but keep at it; our practice of prayer to God and with others is too important to let wither and die from disuse.