

HEART IN ART

Steven Lefebvre

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for September 7–13, 2015.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

“Growing up, I believed that the only way to pray was with words. But as I’ve grown in faith, I’ve come to understand what it means to ‘pray without ceasing’ (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It means that prayer isn’t just making requests, thanking God, and blessing meals. Prayer is about being engaged with the Spirit of God that is living all around us and making all things new. Staying connected to God is about practicing mindfulness and discovering creative new ways to communicate. Prayer can be in everything we do, but it doesn’t simply exist; we have to create prayers. In essence, prayer is art and art is prayer.” —Steven

MEET THE WRITER

My name is **Steven Lefebvre**. I work with the youth and young adults at St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Before my life of working at a church, I was the lead vocalist in a heavy metal band. These days I spend my free time being an armchair film critic, reading comic books, and playing much quieter music (well, sort of). I’m also an amateur champion of darts and dodge ball. I’m a huge fan of going to baseball games in the summer and to college basketball games in the winter. I have a wife, three dogs, and a baby on the way. You can read my blog at www.stevenlefebvre.blogspot.com.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- a Bible
- pencils
- paper
- copies of an icon of Jesus the Good Shepherd (download it at <http://www.chrishowlett.me/.a/6a00e554f33e6f883401bb07eb1d81970d-pi>)

PLUGGED IN

- + In “The Greatest Artist of All Time,” Jefferson Bethke raps about God, the greatest artist. (<https://youtu.be/AZHRpi4z7zk>)

CHECKING IN

Begin by reading Psalm 1. What I like about this passage is the image of “trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season,” which reminds me that I am a work in progress, making things that will bear fruit over time.

After reading Psalm 1, allow a moment of silence. Then invite group members to respond by praying in three different ways:

1. First, encourage the group to try **body prayer**. This prayer practice uses no words and is an excellent method of communicating with God. Words can't always express our thoughts, feelings, or emotions. Sometimes we are filled with so much anguish, joy, or apathy that we have nothing to say. Even when we have nothing to say, God still wants to make a connection with us. Invite group members to pose their bodies in a position that communicates what they think or feel in response to the psalm and to hold the pose for at least 10 seconds.
2. Next, invite the group to **pray with icons**. This prayer practice dates back to the sixth century. In Eastern Orthodox traditions, making and praying with icons is still practiced. Be clear that praying with an icon is not praying to the icon or worshiping the image, which would be in violation of The Ten Commandments. Instead, an icon invites us to gaze upon it and, with our eyes, to make a connection with God. Sometimes allowing the icon to give rise to a thought and then meditating on that thought is helpful; but ultimately, an icon allows us to use our eyes to worship God. Distribute copies of an icon of The Good Shepherd. Read aloud Psalm 23. Then allow five minutes for group members to practice this ancient method of prayer as they meditate on the image of God as the Good Shepherd.
3. Finally, invite group members to **use their gifts to pray** in whatever way they are most comfortable. Ask that they spend five minutes writing poetry, drawing pictures, scribbling, dancing, humming a song, or so on. They may use paper and pencil, if they wish. The only requirement is that they creatively attempt to make a connection with God.

Discuss:

How did this activity change the way you think about prayer?

What does art and creativity have to do with praying?

EXPLORING THE WORD

Scripture: Philippians 4:4–9

Acts 16:12 says that the city of Philippi was a “leading city.” I’m not sure exactly what that means; but as we read Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi, we see that Paul is aware that people are closely watching the rapidly growing Christian community.

In his letter, Paul often encourages his people to rejoice as a method of sharing God’s presence. However, for Paul, the word *rejoice* goes beyond “being glad.” The Greek word, *chairó*, includes the connotation of greeting others. People do not have private celebrations when they are glad; rejoicing pours out of them in all their human interactions. When a person is rejoicing

in God's presence, the Spirit is all around them. When Paul urges the church in Philippi to rejoice, he's not asking them to pretend to be happy. He is telling them to be conduits of God's presence—always.

How do we pull off such an impossible task? By using our gifts, the gifts God has given us.

Philippians 4:8 argues that whatever we do that is pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, or praiseworthy communicates more about God than words can. Why? Because what we make points to the one who made us! Paul goes on to encourage us not only to use our good and perfect gifts, but also to practice and refine our gifts, for then God's presence in us increases. And when God's presence increases, the peace that passes understanding grows in us and in our community. Peace isn't just tranquility or the absence of conflict. It is God's shalom: the kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven," the new heaven and the new earth, the completion of all things. God's peace is what we are all working toward. We don't necessarily need to go out and stop wars or end diseases to make God's rescue of the world happen. Instead when we do our part by practicing our gifts, staying engaged in the Spirit of God (in the many facets of prayer), and sharing the presence of God with others, we change the world—or at least the one closest to us.

Discuss:

When have you felt God's presence while doing something you love?

When have you felt the presence of God while watching someone do something incredible or beautiful?

Do you find this discussion encouraging or discouraging?

Do you know what gifts God has given you?

What can you do to discover what God has made you to do?

How can you use the gifts God has given you to make others aware of God's presence?

SHARING IN PRAYER

End with another method of prayer: **centering prayer**. Encourage group members to focus on the word *rejoice*. Ask them to begin by breathing slowly, clearing their minds of everything except the word *rejoice*. Remind them that centering prayer takes practice; so if they get distracted, they should not be discouraged but gently return to focusing on the word *rejoice*. Allow three to five minutes of silence as group members pray.

TAKING IT FURTHER

This week, do one thing you love to do that involves making something and one thing you have never done before but always wanted to try. Be mindful of God's presence while attempting these tasks.