

Praying *in* COLOR[®]

Sybil MacBeth Drawing a New Path to God

Foreword by Lauren F. Winner

Expanded
and
Enhanced
Edition



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

2019 First Printing Expanded and Enhanced Edition
2008–2016 Fourth Through Tenth Printings First Edition
2007 First, Second, Third Printings First Edition

Praying in Color® Expanded and Enhanced Edition: *Drawing a New Path to God*

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ISBN: 978-1-64060-164-2

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Library of Congress Control Number:2019948972

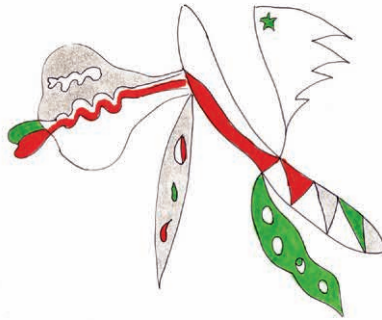
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Published by Paraclete Press
Brewster, Massachusetts
www.paracletepress.com

Printed in China

For Cindy Overmyer
*who first handed me colored markers
and gave me permission to make imperfect drawings*



&
For Clara and Drew
who fill me with gratitude and delight

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Prayer Dilemmas

Here are some reasons that you might want to read this book. If any of these dilemmas describe your efforts at prayer, then you and I stand on some common, shaky ground.

-  You make a list of the people for whom you want to pray and then don't know what to pray for.
-  You can't sit still long enough to get past the "Our Father" or "Hello God" step.
-  Your prayers feel more like a list for Santa Claus than a love letter to God.
-  You fumble for the right words and deem the effort hopeless.
-  You feel powerless, needy, and stupid when you pray.
-  You dump the contents of your heart and mind on God and then wish you hadn't.
-  You turn to a prayer book or the Bible for solace and guidance, and then fail to find the verse that describes your immediate need.
-  Your words feel superficial and fake.

-  You are not sure anyone is out there or is listening.
-  You can't see the point when there are no immediate, concrete results.
-  Your prayers feel too puny, too self-centered, too phony . . . or just somehow . . . inadequate.
-  You're bored with the same old prayers that you've said since you were a toddler.
-  You ask that God's will be done, then cross your fingers and hope you can bear the results.
-  You promise to pray for others, and then forget who they are and what they requested.
-  You can't wait for your prayer time to be over and done with.
-  You start to pray and realize that you're thinking about paying the bills.
-  Praying for others feels like checking off errands on a "to-do" list.
-  Your spirit and body reach a place of calm and stillness in prayer and then you fall asleep.
-  You want to like the act of praying, but it is more often obligation and drudgery than joy.
-  Your kindergarten image of God doesn't seem real anymore, so you wonder who you are praying to.
-  You're sure that everyone you know is a better and more effective pray-er than you are.



Foreword

It would not be an overstatement to say that *Praying in Color*[®] rescued my devotional life from nonexistence. I had been, for some years, barely praying—going to church, yes, but all the noble aspirations I’d had about praying at home, praying in the mornings—all the attempts at lovely-sounding spiritual habits like *lectio divina*, Ignatian examen, centering prayer—they’d all evaporated. Or, to change the metaphor, dried up. Or left.

Truth to tell, it seemed like God had left, too. I’m not sure what’s the cause here and what’s the result: you don’t pray much, so your sense of God wanes, or your sense of God wanes, so you stop praying. Probably both.

In the midst of all this waning and evaporation, I attended a conference where Sybil MacBeth gave a brief presentation on doodling and prayer. That was my first introduction to *praying in color*. I picked up the book a few months later. I’d heard Sybil say at the conference, very clearly, that you needn’t be a competent artist to doodle-pray, but I didn’t totally believe her. Still, with no special markers (I did buy some later) and no special sketchpad (that, too), I tried what I now think of as “basic” *praying in color*, the method of intercessory prayer Sybil introduces in chapters 5 and 6. In subsequent chapters you’ll discover variations on the theme, but the basic method is laid out there in chapters 5 and 6: place a name of God in the center of your page, and begin to jot down people and situations you want to pray for, and doodle around your jottings, keeping your hand moving—triangles, squiggles, your neighbor’s uterine cancer, your best friend’s kid’s addiction,

more triangles, hexagons, a pink squiggly telephone cord, your own heavy sorrow about something you can't quite name, another hexagon. On that September afternoon, I tried praying thus—I drew a flame at the center of my page and began to pray my concerns to the God who appeared to Moses and to the early church as fire. And somehow ninety minutes passed without my noticing. I was, for the first time in years, *absorbed* in prayer.

For a good while, I thought that when I interceded-via-doodling—for my friend newly widowed, or for my own small parish church, or for Jeanne and Josie, just married, may their joy be preserved—I thought I was bringing these people into the presence of God. Maybe. Maybe that's what we do when we intercede. But maybe I am also, more simply, noticing all the ways that my widow-friend and my church are already in God's presence. Maybe what my doodles really ask is that God's presence become more pressing, more shimmery, more undeniable. I don't know if God's presence nudged up closer to my widow-friend as a result of my prayers, but God certainly pressed more on me. The God I'd thought absent, or the God I'd not truly wanted to notice—the presence of that God returned to me through months of doodle-prayer. My desire to be near that God returned, too.

I've given away more copies of this book than I can count, and taught the basics of *praying in color* in church fellowship halls, in hospital rooms, and in university classrooms and prison classrooms. At the women's prison in Raleigh, where I often teach varieties of prayer practices, I sometimes ask my class "If you were to take up this particular prayer practice"—daily psalm reading, *lectio divina*, silent contemplation, whatever—"for five years or ten years or twenty years, what do you imagine your relationship with God would look like at the end, after all those years of praying in this particular way?" Once, when I asked this about *praying in color*, the answer I received



was “Fun. I think my relationship with God would be fun.” It would be characterized by play, by pleasure, by enjoyment.

I’m pretty self-serious about prayer, and I don’t generally think of myself as a “fun” person, and I don’t think it would have occurred to me that a particular mode of praying could help me discover “fun” in my relationship with God (my own answer was something about attention and freedom-in-the-divine—see what I mean by “self-serious”?). But having practiced *praying in color* for over a decade, I can attest that *praying in color* is fun. “Fun” isn’t a comprehensive statement about the range of praying in color—I’ve color-prayed my share of laments, and confusions—but my interlocutor at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women named one of the centerpieces of this practice: through *praying in color*, I have found at the heart of my relationship with God, and at the heart of my prayer life, delight.

Enjoy!

—Lauren F. Winner



Introduction

—*Prayer and Play*

Almost two decades after my first doodle morphed into a prayer, I'm still *praying in color*. It is the way my hands, eyes, brain, heart, and whole body nestle into prayer. Although *praying in color* involves color, it is not an exercise in coloring. Pen, paper, and colored markers or pencils are the tools for the organic growing of a visual prayer.

When I first started *praying in color* I wondered, “Is this really prayer? It feels serious, but also light and relaxing. It feels prayerful, but also playful. Can a spiritual practice be both prayerful and playful?” When I look at the words *pray* and *play* I notice they are almost physically identical. They differ by only one letter, with three letters in common. And they have other things in common, too. *Pray* and *play* are both about becoming childlike, being vulnerable, being open to the new, letting go, and surrendering to the moment. Jesus touts being childlike. He said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3 NIV).

When I was a kid, my playmates in the neighborhood and I were willing to be led by the leader of the day into unknown territory. We traipsed into the alley, the woods, the next street over, a construction site. We trusted another kid to take us on a new adventure. We were willing to look foolish and to risk skinned knees, scratched arms, and bruised legs.



In the best of my prayer times, I let go of my need for control and allow myself to be led by “a power greater than myself.”¹ God and the silence take me to new places. Returning unscathed is not guaranteed. The places I go in prayer and meditation can be liberating and wonderful, but they can also be risky and threatening to the life I know. If I am looking to have my opinions, beliefs, life, and knees untouched, I should probably avoid the surprise encounters of prayer altogether. Prayer assumes my willingness to listen, to be vulnerable, to follow, and to change. Prayer and meditation can keep me on the right road, but they can also take me off the map. I trust God to lead me in this adventure.

Prayer and play are also both about relationship. Relationships are based on ongoing connection through a full range of daily experiences and emotions—joys and sorrow, laughter and tears. So why do we often get serious and sober and pious when we pray? A human relationship based on just seriousness and pretense gets boring and cumbersome. Play is an important ingredient in most of my healthy relationships. In *What the Body Wants*, Cynthia Winton-Henry says, “Play is honest. You can’t play unless you are yourself.”² Same with prayer. I cannot pray if I offer a fake, spiffed-up version of myself to God. Honesty involves offering my dreams, my sins, my skepticism, my fears, my humor, my failures, my successes . . . the whole of me. I want my relationship with God to be healthy, joyful, both serious and playful, and most of all honest.

The biblical writers witnessed to an understanding of this lush relationship with God in their frequent use of the word *delight*. This word is used throughout Scripture, especially in the Psalms.

“Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Ps. 37:4 NRSV)

“Will they take delight in the Almighty? Will they call upon God at all times?” (Job 27:10 NRSV)

“I delight to do Your will, O my God, And Your law is within my heart.” (Ps. 40:8 NKJV)

One of the best gifts I receive from *praying in color* is a renewed sense of *delight* in my prayer time. *Delight* does not mean blind and giggly happiness; it means expectant enthusiasm and energy. Prayer no longer feels like an obligation. When I draw as a way to enter prayer, I feel a sense of hopeful and grateful anticipation for this time with God—even if the subject of my prayers is serious or scary. Prayer can be the heavy labor of my heart and mind where I am sometimes the foreman on a job site. Or prayer can be my joy and freedom, the place where I get to play in the presence of my Creator, where I get a taste of “the glorious liberty of being a child of God” (paraphrase of Rom. 8:21). Maybe God even delights at the puny efforts I make to show up in prayer.

The spiritual practice of *praying in color* embraces both prayer and play. For me, a spiritual practice is the opposite of multi-tasking. It is the gathering of my mind, body, emotions, thoughts, and spirit into the same geography and staying there for a while. The practice of *praying in color* convenes my disparate parts, keeps me in my chair, and turns me into a community of stillness and listening. The word “practice” implies frequent and repeated attempts to reach this place.

I approach prayer from a Christian perspective—but *praying in color* is for anyone who longs for connection with a “higher power” or wants to experience



a visual and kinesthetic way to meditate. If you are new to *praying in color* this book is an invitation to try a hands-on, eyes-open spiritual practice.

If you are a *Praying in Color* returnee, thank you. Part 0, my prayer and *praying-in-color* autobiography, will be familiar. In Parts 1 through 8 I hope you will find some fresh ideas to boost and bolster your prayer life. This expanded version has many new images and many new ways to use *praying in color*.

I used to think prayer and meditation were lonely pursuits. But in my solitude and solitary prayers, I no longer feel the loneliness and isolation I used to. When I look at my pages of prayers I see a whole community of people I'm praying for and praying with. When I lead workshops and retreats I experience a wide network of people who long for connection to God, for honest relationships with others, and for a place to share their brokenness and their wholeness. I am grateful for the many individuals and groups who took the idea of *praying in color* and made it their own. I am grateful for the far-reaching web of both physical and virtual pray-ers who make me feel less alone.

—Sybil MacBeth
July 2019

Part 0

From Despair to Prayer

- Chapter -5 | Praying in Color
- Chapter -4 | Reasons Why I Pray
- Chapter -3 | Prayer Frustration
- Chapter -2 | Prayer Popping
- Chapter -1 | Praying for Others
- Chapter 0 | Praying in a New Way

Chapter-5

Praying in Color

Praying in color is an active, meditative, and playful prayer practice. It is both a process and a product. The process involves re-entry into the childlike world of doodling, coloring, and improvising to create a quiet time of prayer and meditation. The product is a visual prayer, a reminder of your time spent in prayer, and a prompt for ongoing prayer.

Now, before you slam this book shut with the panicky feeling that this is an exercise for artists, please wait. This practice requires no skill. I cannot draw a cat. Or a dog. Or anything else for that matter. Throughout my years in school, C's in Art were blemishes on an otherwise respectable report card. My artist mother and grandmother could only sigh and wonder what had gone awry in the tossing of the genetic salad.

But in spite of artistic deficiencies, I have always loved color. The stadium-seating of the 48 crayons in the Crayola box, the sweet smell of paper and

wax, and the feel of the thin cylinders rolling around in my hand were an early experience of worship. A little altar was set before me with all those colors waiting to evangelize the world. So much potential for beauty and transformation—it seemed a terrible injustice that what I drew was so ugly.

The irony and miracle for me is that now, in my adulthood, God has taken one of my passions—color; combined it with one of my inadequacies—drawing; added it to my antsy and improvisational personality; and given me a new, embodied way to pray. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9 NIV). My expertise was unnecessary for prayer; my weaknesses were. I think I have an inkling of what Paul felt when the Lord spoke those words to him.












So I repeat: no skill is required. If you are a visual or kinesthetic learner, a distractible or impatient soul, a word-weary pray-er or just a person looking for a new way to pray, I hope you will find this practice helpful. If not, I hope it will jump-start some new prayer ideas for you.




















Chapter -4

Reasons Why I Pray

Here are some of the specific reasons I pray:

-  To connect and be in relationship with God
-  To have a regular spiritual practice
-  To express awe and wonder
-  To worship
-  To experience inner stillness and calm
-  To be emptied but also to be in receiving mode
-  To get my priorities straight
-  To ask for help and healing
-  To rant, rage, complain, protest
-  To confess the stuff I'm not proud of
-  To ask for forgiveness

-  To express my concerns and hopes for other people
-  To offer thanksgiving and gratitude
-  To become “right-sized”³: not to think too little of myself, not to think too much of myself
-  To remember that my life is a tiny thing in a vast universe
-  To give my fear and worry to a power greater than myself
-  To have a place to dump every thought I have—the ugly and the beautiful
-  To have a place to share my desires, dreams, and nagging voices
-  To reevaluate my life
-  To listen for and to God
-  To seek affirmation and correction
-  To remember that I am a child of God
-  To eliminate my desire to fix others
-  To admit my powerlessness over so many things
-  To discover the power I do have
-  To work on my arrogant and judgmental attitude
-  To be a dreamer, to imagine a world beyond the apparent facts
-  To surrender my life to God



Chapter -3

Prayer Frustration

I am a writer and community college mathematics professor by vocation, a dancer and doodler by avocation, and a pray-er by birth. My mother breathed prayers into me from the moment I was born. While God “knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:13 NRSV), my mother said “Amen”—let it be so—with every stitch. As a result, I have no memory of a God-free life. My earliest childhood memories are of my mother sitting on the edge of my bed, stroking my hair, and reciting our nightly prayer:

*Father-Mother God,
Loving me, —
Guard me when I sleep;
Guide my little feet
Up to Thee.⁴*

I liked the prayer. It was simple to say and easy to visualize. The fact that I saw myself upside down with my toes wiggling toward God was not a problem. Since I was a footling breech at birth, it seemed the natural way to approach God. The prayer was also less scary than the one that both my little Catholic and other Protestant friends said—“and if I die before I wake,



I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Feet I could understand, but death and souls were the stuff of my big brother’s ghost stories. Being “loved, guarded and guided” was comforting reassurance of God’s protection and care in the dark and unpredictable nighttime.

I have a large cache of memorized prayers, psalms, and hymns from my Sunday School and church experiences. These prayers are the cornerstone foundation for my relationship with God. They gave me my first spiritual vocabulary and a way to communicate with God. Even now they serve as a deep source of comfort and joy with their familiar and beautiful words. With prayer so deeply ingrained in my being, I should be an expert. Lush and articulate prayers should come easily to me. But if Prayer is a credit course in the kingdom of heaven, I’m in trouble. The report card grade of C- would probably say: “not enough detail, wandering attention, too many clichés, too little time and effort, too self-focused, too much fidgeting, too much whining . . . ” I’ve never been much of a prayer warrior; I cannot fire out eloquent, television-worthy prayers. My niece, who is outgoing and in touch with her feelings, loves to “talk” with God. Her ease with prayer is enviable. My shyness and headiness hinder my efforts for an intimate verbal conversation with God.

Instead, I am a prayer popper. I pray a lot, but in fits and spurts, half-formed pleas and intercessions, and bursts of gratitude and rage.

Although I am no longer a member of the church that soaked my childhood in prayer, I cling to one of the principles that I learned there: Prayer is an every-moment activity—not just on Sundays or at the dinner table or at bedtime. Prayer is the glue that holds all of the pieces of my life together in a spiritual whole. It reminds me of who I am—a beloved child of God, made in God’s image and likeness. My early Sunday school teachers and my mother took seriously the directive from 1 Thessalonians 5:17:



“Pray without ceasing” (KJV). Other translations and versions of the Bible use similar words: “pray constantly” (RSV), “pray continually” (NEB), “sine intermissione orate” (LV)—which might be translated “without intermission speak.” In any language, the challenge is clear.

Although those words can feel like an order for an impossible mission, they seem to me more like a personal invitation. “Be with God here and now; come to the party.” But as with all party invitations, my anxiety rises. “What shall I wear?” The clothing in this case is the kind of prayer I will pray. I want to go beyond my closetful of memorized prayers and explore other styles of prayer. Prayer forms fascinate me. I know about centering prayer, contemplative prayer, walking prayer, healing prayer, soaking prayer, meditation, praying in tongues—I took the workshops and read the books. I have dabbled in all of them and I am grateful for the ways they expand my understanding of prayer. But a short attention span and a proclivity for daydreams hamper my efforts. Five or six sentences or breaths into a well-intentioned prayer, I lose focus. Ungraded math papers on the desk or an impending book deadline noodle their way into my thoughts. Anxiety about my inadequate parenting joins in the conversation. The words of my prayers and the words of my distractions collide in an unholy mess. On a good day, when words flow with more ease, I become so impressed with my successful articulation that I become the center of my own worship. It is not a reverent sight.

With feelings of guilt and inadequacy, I’ve thought about bagging the whole prayer exercise. But I have a priest friend named, appropriately enough, Merry, who encourages me: “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing poorly,” she says. Besides, there’s that deep, unrelenting hunger to know God. Prayer, even below-average prayer, is my feeble effort to get acquainted.

Chapter -2

Prayer Popping

As a prayer popper, I stay in touch with God. I send lots of spiritual postcards. Little bits and bytes of adoration, supplication, and information attached to prayer darts speed in God's direction all day long. A friend of mine calls postcards "maintenance mail." Instead of waiting to write a Pulitzer Prize-winning letter, she sends frequent postcards to maintain her relationships. It is a good means of communication, certainly better than nothing. But thinking that any relationship will grow when I'm only willing to commit two or three minutes of time or 2 inches by 3 inches of space is delusion. How often can I receive postcards from a friend that say, "All's well, hope you're okay, thinking of you, back soon," and believe that I am really important? Though God probably appreciates my regular check-ins, "Hi God, Bye God," doesn't feel much like a formula for creating intimacy or a relationship with much depth.



For me, intimacy requires more than a minute here and there; it requires time. And it requires time after time of time. The word *intimacy* has its roots in an alteration of the Latin *intime* (Merriam-Webster Online). Although there are no etymological connections, adding a space to *intime* results in the sweet coincidence of *in time*.

Since words elude me when I need them most, I learned long ago that I cannot count on quality time with God when I want to pray. I need quantity and regularity. Quality is not something I can predict. My husband, Andy, and I might schedule an elaborate evening out with candles and a gourmet meal, but there is no guarantee that we'll have a wonderful time. Much of our intimacy has been created in the daily-daily of spending time together—chopping onions and peppers side-by-side in the kitchen, reading together on the couch, sitting on the front step watching kids on bikes and skateboards, and mapping out plans for our life together.

So I need a way to pray that gives me time. I need a way to pray that does not require lengthy, prize-winning words. I need a way to pray that suits my short attention span, my restless body, and my inclination to live in my head. I need a way to stay in the chair and “wait for the Lord.”

Chapter -1

Praying for Others

I feel quite free to make a mess of my personal prayer life; but when someone says, “Please pray for me,” they are not just saying “Let’s have lunch sometime.” They are issuing an invitation into the depths of their lives and their humanity—and often with some urgency. They are publicly exposing their vulnerability, sorrow, and fear. Something about their life is so out-of-control that they call upon the likes of me for help. I warn them that sometimes the people I’ve prayed for have died. It’s a risk.

There’s also the risk that instead of praying for them, I’ll just worry about them. And worry is not substitute for prayer. Worry is a *starting place*, but not a *staying place*. As a *starting place*, worry is a psychophysical signal that something is wrong. Like guilt, it lets me know that something is askew or not quite right in the universe. I’m not a proponent of guilt-busting or even worry-busting. If I chase guilt and worry away too quickly, I miss the message they bring. They arrive uninvited, but I may need them to stick around for a while. They are my wake-up call, my psychic and spiritual reveille. Both



guilt and worry can trumpet, “Get off your duff, get out and do something, get your act together, get your hands off, get out of this situation. . . .” But almost always they say, “Get on your knees; this is more than you can handle alone.” Worry invites me into prayer.

As a *staying place*, worry can be self-indulgent, paralyzing, draining, and controlling. It conjures up the dark side of my imaginative gifts and consumes my energy. It is no less evil or titillating than pornography. When I offer my excessive worry to God, it doesn’t disappear, but it becomes smaller. I see it for its true self—an imposter that masks itself as action and lassoes me into inaction. Brought into prayer, it sits next to me and whimpers for its former place of honor and power. When I focus on my prayer, on that conscious effort to engage the presence of God, worry heels, stays, and sometimes even rolls over and dies.

So when people ask for my prayers, I take a deep breath, put the choke chain on worry, and walk, leash in hand, into that place called prayer. When I ask people to pray for me, I hope they will do the same. I don’t want them to worry about the details of my request. Obsessing about my sorrow, “talking” about my bad behavior and wayward children, peeping through the keyhole of my confessions, fantasizing my diagnosis and prognosis, or writing my obituary is not their task. Their task is to fill the universe with good thoughts, to wrap me in God’s love, to give me hope, and to intercede for my healing. I want them to reconnect my hands and heart with God’s when I’m too fraught with fear or sadness to do it by myself. When I pray for others, I assume they are asking for the same respect. I assume they want me to hold my obsessive and voyeuristic thoughts at a distance as well.

It’s a daunting responsibility to say “I will” to someone’s prayer request; and it is with some caution and trepidation that I make the offer, “Would you like me to pray for you?”