



Praying with the Poets

T.S. Eliot * Mary Oliver * Emily Dickinson * Langston Hughes * Tagore
Maya Angelo * Jane Kenyon * Dylan Thomas * Rumi * Wendell Berry
Thomas Traherne * Scott Cairns

Community Christian Church – 4601 Main Street – Kansas City Missouri
Session #11 – Scott Cairns

Scott Cairns (1954 – ____) – born in Tacoma, Washington; educated at Western Washington University (BA), Hollins College (MA), Bowling Green State University (M.F.A.), University of Utah (Ph.D.); has taught at University of North Texas, Old Dominion University, and, currently the University of Missouri (Columbia) where he is Professor of English and Director the Creative Writing Program; grew up nominally Protestant until he came to the realization in his 40's that he didn't have a prayer life; pursued the mysteries and blessings of Orthodox traditions; converted to Greek Orthodox Church; has made several pilgrimages to Mount Athos, site of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world; author of seven books of poetry and a spiritual memoir; awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 2006.

Day #1: Realization – In his spiritual memoir *Short Trip to the Edge*, Scott Cairns recollects a middle age realization:

Lately, the crux of my matter has pretty much come down to this: having said prayers since childhood, I startled one day to the realization that – at the middling age of forty – I had not yet learned to pray...

I remember the moment of this realization with startling clarity, and with a good dose of chagrin. I was romping at the beach with Mona, our yellow Labrador. It was a gorgeous morning in early spring: absolutely clear, the air still crisp, tasting of salt from the bay, the water and sky mirroring a mutual, luminous turquoise....

In the midst of such bounty and such promise, and provoked by nothing I could name, I suddenly thought what might seem like a strange thought under the circumstances....

At the age of forty, I raised my arm to fling a sodden stick into the Chesapeake; I looked down to see my beautiful, dripping, yellow dog – braced, alert, eager, her eyes lit up with wild expectation. I didn't want to let her down.

My life at that precise moment reminds me of the bumper sticker I saw years ago: I WANT TO BE THE MAN THAT MY DOG THINKS I AM.

Pray today for the graced realization(s) of your actual, honestly assessed place in your spiritual journey. Then pray that God will move you to take the steps to become your best self.

Day #2: Prayer Answers – In Cairns' poem "Possible Answers to Prayer," the authorial voice assumes God's perspective.

*Your petitions – though they continue to bear just the one signature – have been duly recorded.
Your anxieties – despite their constant,*

relatively narrow scope and inadvertent entertainment value – nonetheless serve to bring your person vividly to mind.

Your repentance – all but obscured beneath a burgeoning, yellow fog of frankly more conspicuous resentment – is sufficient.

Your intermittent concern for the sick, the suffering, the needy poor is sometimes recognizable to me, if not to them.

Your angers, your zeal, your lipsmackingly righteous indignation toward the many whose habits and sympathies offend you –

these must burn away before you'll apprehend how near I am, with what fervor I adore precisely these, the several who rouse your passions.

Pray today for a release from "[y]our angers, your zeal, your lipsmackingly/ righteous indignation toward the many/ whose habits and sympathies offend you," so that you might see more clearly God's love for them ... and for you.

Day #3: Poem, Song, or Prayer? – In "Replies to the Immediate," a poem which Cairns once read during a Wednesday evening vespers service at Community, the poetic voice describes the difference between poetry, song, and prayer.

No, he mumbled from the podium, the poems are not my songs. A breeze troubled the papers in his hands, and a shift in the air also sent

a wave across those seated, tossing their hair, their broad lapels, their scarves.

The programs in their hands also whispered. Nor, the man continued, nor

are they my prayers. At that word, the air grew still, and across his face passed both

a tremor and a calm. Song, he said, attains to a condition the poem

dare not attend. And prayer? Who would frame a poem when he had better find

his knees, in silence, having put his art away?

Pray today without artifice and pretense. Pray also by begging to differ with Dr. Cairns and noting how one can experience all three occasions – song, poetry, and being on one’s knees in prayer – in the same moment, with the confidence that all three may seek to attain to a condition of intimacy with God.

Day #4: Sacred Flesh– In his most recent book, *Love’s Immensity: Mystics on the Endless Life*, Cairns presents the earliest sources of wisdom in the Christian tradition. And he does so in the fashion of what some folks call “found poems.” Consider the following gem of a poem, “Capable Flesh,” in which he and the Early Church Father Irenaeus give account of just how sacred human flesh truly is and can be.

*"The tender flesh itself
will be found one day
– quite surprisingly –
to be capable of receiving,
and yes, full
capable of embracing
the searing energies of God.
Go figure. Fear not.
For even at its beginning
the humble clay received
God's art, whereby
one part became the eye,
another the ear, and yet
another this impetuous hand.
Therefore, the flesh
is not to be excluded
from the wisdom and the power
that now and ever animates
all things. His life-giving
agency is made perfect,
we are told, in weakness –
made perfect in the flesh."*

Pray today by giving thanks for your “en-fleshed” life, for the graces of it, for the power of it, for the energizing of it by God’s inspiring presence.

Day #5: Sin = Wasting of Time– In his poem “Adventures in New Testament Greek: Metanoia,” Cairns takes up the theme of repentance. The poem ends like this:

*The heart’s metanoia,
on the other hand, turns
without regret, turns not
so much away, as toward,

as if the slow pilgrim
has been surprised to find
that sin is not so bad
as it is a waste of time.*

Pray today as a “slow pilgrim” who has come to the transforming understanding that repentance can

move you beyond sin’s unholy wastefulness of time.

Day #6: Falling and Getting Up Again– In the poem “Setting Out,” in his most recent book of new poems, *Compass of Affection*, Cairns speaks about the basics of faith and the fundamentals of the human condition. As a self-described “slow pilgrim” himself, Cairns speaks plainly about moving into deeper life and greater faith.

Pilgrim: What is it that you do here?
Monk: We fall, and we get up again.

*In time, even the slowest pilgrim might
articulate a turn. ...*

*The road was, more or less, less
compelling than the hut, but as the benefit*

*of time allowed the hut’s distractions to attain
a vaguely musty scent, and all the novel*

*knickknacks to acquire a fine veneer of bone-
white dust, the road became then somewhat more*

*attractive; and as the weather made a timely
if quite brief concession, the pilgrim took this all*

to be an open invitation to set out.

Pray today that God will prompt you with an invitation, in all of your life circumstances, to set out on a new discovery of grace in your life and in the world.

Day #7: Love– In “Love’s Purpose,” a poem Cairns has crafted/ discovered from the words of an early Christian mystic, Saint Isaac of Nineveh, we find:

*"In love did He bring the world
into being, and in love
does He guide its difficult,
slow-seeming journey now
through the arc of time...."*

Pray today for the peace that comes from knowing God’s intention to love you, and the world, and everything beyond, through the coursing of time.

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This is a part of the weekly series of the Prayer Group of
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