



# Summer Sabbath Series

## The Inventions of Summer ~ Summer 2020

*The Summer Sabbath Series 2020: The Inventions of Summer is written by  
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*A Note from Janice...*

*The poet, Mary Oliver gazes on the splendour of roses and declares there is no end to the "inventions of summer." This phrase, from her poem, "The Roses" in her book Devotions, The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver, prompted me to reflect on the "inventions of summer" that inspire me.*

*I thought of many:*

- *There is nothing I love more than a field of sunflowers and seeing them turn their face to the sky. They pronounce blessing by their presence.*
- *I can't wait for the first taste of garden-fresh string beans. They teach willingness and ask me to name my prayers of thanksgiving and ponder how I return blessing to Earth.*
- *I remember catching fireflies in a mason jar. Do you? Fireflies speak a language of love. This prompts prayers for others.*
- *Then there are mosquitoes. "Mosquitoes? You say!" Yes, these mosquitoes teach us to pray in hard times.*

*What are your plans for summer? In these days that is not an easy question to answer. In the midst of uncertainty, I offer this small booklet of devotions and prayer practices to nurture and enrich your summer-time space, whether you are home for a staycation, at the cottage, out on your back deck or sitting in your most comfortable chair.*

*Or perhaps you are part of a community of faith that takes a Sabbath break over the summer. This small booklet offers devotions for you to use on four Sundays. Know you are joined in prayer with many others. Together, apart.*

*The pattern for our Summer Sabbath is simple.:*

*We begin with a scripture you can read and "inwardly digest"  
or you can spend time with the short focussing verse.*

*I wrote a reflection for you to ponder. Take your time and enjoy slow reading.*

*An evocative question or two might lead you to your own reflection.*

*You might want to learn by heart the breath prayer. It's a short phrase you can use throughout the day/week. The spiritual practice leads you into different experiences of prayer.*

*You may want to use a Summer 2020 journal for drawing, doodling, writing a poem or a prayer,  
or journaling your thoughts and experiences as you explore the "inventions of summer."*

*Enjoy your Summer Sabbath!*

*Janice*

Host of the Prayer Bench

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## 1. SUNFLOWERS: Pronouncing a Blessing

### READ PSALM 113

*“From the rising of the sun to its setting  
the name of the Lord is to be praised.”*

-- Psalm 113:3

### PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

The poet Mary Oliver calls the sun the “best preacher that ever was.”<sup>1</sup> That makes a field of sunflowers the best congregation ever. Don’t you just love their bright colour and how they turn themselves to face the sun? They make a journey every day.

Some varieties of sunflowers grow over 12 feet tall. I think they are elegant. They are also practical. Sunflowers are used for medicine, dye, food, and oil. They attract bees. Deer find them tasty when the plant is young. (This might not be a good thing if you are not a deer.) Birds enjoy the seeds; one sunflower can contain up to 2000 seeds. Artists love their uniqueness.

Sunflowers are one of my favourite “inventions of summer.” They spark awe in me. Their turning with the sun makes me think they are very good at praising the Maker. They are practiced in blessing.

In Psalm 113, the Psalmist thinks the Sun’s daily journey across the sky is a source of wonder. With the sunrise, we awaken to the day and look expectantly to new beginnings, fresh possibilities and novel joys. With the sunset, we say thanks, we let go all that is undone, deal with what is unsettled in us and seek rest in the stillness of the evening.

Like sunflowers who follow the sun, we are part of this rhythm. This is our daily prayer. We receive the day with the intention of seeing the Divine in every place, in every creature, in every hour. Here is God. And here. And here. God is pouring God into sunflowers and into all that is around us. We are not alone. Blessed be!

Each day is different. Some days it is easy to be delighted and bless the Maker. It’s delightful to be part of the journey, from the rising of the sun to its setting. Some days our feelings are ragged, and our emotions run deep. These days make it difficult to trust in that Sustaining Mystery. We find it hard to see the sun.

Blessing is a choice we make every day. When we rise up and when we lay down and all the moments in between. Indeed, we can bless the Maker in all things and every situation. Some days it just takes more effort, more practice.

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<sup>1</sup> “Why I Wake Early,” *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, Penguin Press, 2017, page 171.  
Prayer Bench [www.prayerbench.ca](http://www.prayerbench.ca)

What are the ways you bless the Maker? What helps you notice the Presence of God in all that is around you? What is your morning practice of welcoming the day? through the journey of the day? when evening comes? Might you find a sign or a symbol of Sustaining Mystery as you go through this day? As you set your face to the sun today, how many ways will you find to praise the Maker?

## **BREATH PRAYER**

*Sing praises to the Maker of the Universe.*

### **PRACTICE “PRONOUNCING A BLESSING”**

“Pronouncing a blessing.” It has an old-fashioned air to it, doesn’t it? What images come to mind?

The work of pronouncing a blessing belongs to all and it isn’t limited to the human species. The sunset pronounced a blessing as it dipped in glory. The friend who called or texted “just because” pronounced a blessing on your friendship.

Blessings call out goodness in ourselves, in others, and in the world around us. “Bless you, Sun, for you are faithful in your daily journey across the sky.” “Bless you, Sunflower, for you bring cheer to many hearts.” “Bless you, six feet distant from me, that you be well this day.”

Pronounce blessings today.

Bless the experiences and encounters of this day, remembering the Sustaining Presence of the One with us in all times, in all places, and in all circumstances.

Bless the earth, its creatures and all the elements, as you come across them today. Affirm their essential goodness.

Bless the humans, whether you know them or not, and trust the blessing reaches what is good and true and beautiful in them.

Bless aloud. Bless silently. Be generous in pronouncing your blessings.

*After you have blessed, allow your heart to swell with gratitude.  
Write a poem. Dance. Journal. Sing.*

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## **2. STRING BEANS: Taking Up the Offerings**

## READ COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

*“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,  
to which indeed you were called in the one body.  
And be thankful.”*  
-- Colossians 3:15

### PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Is there anything more lovely in summer than the first taste of string beans?

But before that, there is planting the seed. Do you remember the school project sprouting the plump seeds between two pieces of damp paper towel? Then planting one or two in a tiny pot? And then the waiting.

String beans are easy to grow and one of the most frequently prepared summer vegetables. Hot, cold, and even raw, string beans are versatile in the kitchen.

Harvesting green beans is an ongoing task and there is the delicious irony that the more you pick, the more beans the plants will set. I also remember being taught not to pick them when the plant was wet, or they would rust.

Mary Oliver writes a short essay about Beans. (If you google “Beans by Mary Oliver” you might find it, but it is also in her book *Devotions*. This is one of my favourite books and definitely on the list to take to a desert island or a summer staycation.)

Oliver reminds us that when we are picking beans we rarely think about “their willingness for the pot, for the fire” and “the gift of their lives to assist [ours].”

“Be thankful,” says Paul in his Letter. “Be thankful.” The practice of gratitude reminds that there are so many gifts in the world. Big gifts and small. It is worth reflecting on the ordinary string bean and what it gives as a gift to the world.

Nurturing a heart of gratitude may help us experience positive emotions, feel more alive in ourselves, be more compassionate to one another and kind to creation and even sleep better. Let our prayers of thanksgiving overflow.

We honour the gifts we receive when we say thanks. But gratitude does not end with the expression of our thanks. What comes after thanksgiving? We have a responsibility to keep gifts in motion by giving back when we have received. Thanksgiving is something we do. A gift asks something of us.

Consider carefully these words of Robin Wall Kimmerer, who writes of reciprocity in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. (Another highly recommended book for a staycation.)

“In the teachings of my Potawatomi ancestors, responsibilities and gifts are understood as two sides of the same coin. The possession of a gift is coupled with a duty to use it for the benefit of all. A thrush is given the gift of song—and so has a responsibility to greet the day with music. Salmon have

the gift of travel, so they accept the duty of carrying food upriver. So when we ask ourselves, what is our responsibility to the Earth, we are also asking, "What is our gift?"<sup>2</sup>

When we accept the gift of a string bean as a delightful invention of summer, we have a responsibility, in turn, to offer our gift. Our first response is heartfelt thanksgiving. From there, we keep the gift in motion by offering the unique gift we are to the world.

Imagine all the gifts in circulation in this one body of Earth. Confess how our species has often forgotten the willingness of string bean for the pot. Look back over the day so far. What other gifts have you forgotten?

### **BREATH PRAYER**

*"A divine voice sings through all creation."*

– from a Jewish Prayer.

### **PRACTICE "TAKING UP THE OFFERINGS"**

Find a giving position for your body. Seriously, try out a few postures and gestures. You will know when you have found the giving gesture that is right for you.

Hold this gesture and make silence for at least 5 minutes. Allow gifts to come to your heart. As a gift arrives, breathe in your thanks. Like this: *A tree...* breathe in thanks and then let go the thought. Return to silence and receive another gift. *The gift of what you ate for lunch ...* breathe in thanks and then let go the thought. Allow other gifts to come to your heart. Delight in other inventions of summer. Accept all gifts that arise even the ones that may not initially feel like a gift. Accept and let go with gratitude in your heart.

When your 5 minutes has passed (or however long you decide to pray) ask yourself: What is the gift I will give today that changes the world a little bit? Notice during the day the times you are offering gift to the world. Keep gifts in motion.

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<sup>2</sup> "Returning the Gift" by Robin Wall Kimmerer posted in the Centre for Humans and Nature, online article accessed May 2020. <https://www.humansandnature.org/earth-ethic-robin-kimmerer>

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### 3. MOSQUITOES: Praying Through Hard Times

#### READ EPHESIANS 6: 10-18

*“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.  
To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.”  
– Ephesians 6: 18*

#### PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

In case anyone is wondering, yes mosquitoes are small insects that bite, and their irritating itchy bite seems like it lasts half the summer. Mosquitoes can ruin a lovely evening reading on the back deck in a few whirring moments. And that whiny hum of their buzzing wings in the bedroom? That can drive anyone to distraction.

Yes, they may be a reliable source of food for birds, bats, dragonflies and frogs in the chain of life, but they are also vectors for deadly disease, especially malaria.

So why am I considering mosquitoes as one our “inventions of summer?”

Because life is sometimes hard and we are living in an exceptional time and mosquitoes, with their annoying ways, can teach us something about praying through hard times.

I’m talking about the hard times that come to each of us as part of being human, with soft bodies in a hard world. We get bad news. We struggle with disappointments or anxiety or fear. We grieve the loss of loved ones or dreams, or the best job ever, or a friend who moves away, physically or emotionally.

*How do you pray your way through hard times like this?* Seriously, reflect on this because we all have ways we pray. Perhaps it is the urgent “Dear God, do something.” And that’s ok. It’s not a prayer for the long haul but in a moment of pain, it is a reaching out for comfort.

A prayer of lament will take us through that transition from pouring out emotion, to a space of living with. Read the Psalms for lessons in lamenting.

Silence is a friend of the pray-er in hard times. There may be no words, but a silent being in the Presence of the Divine wherever we experience that Presence (in a garden, walking by the shoreline, with a friend who holds space). You have your prayers for hard times, I am sure.

Beyond our personal supplication, I am also talking about praying in a hard world. Did you read the Ephesians story of “putting on the armour of God?” I’m uncomfortable with all the military images: Helmets. Breastplates. Shields. It is what soldiers in Bible days put on before they went into battle. Writing to beleaguered Christians, the writer of this letter used the image of enclothed warriors to encourage living faithfully in a hard world. It was the metaphor he had at hand.

Uncomfortable, I still chose it because I think this teaching calls us to wake up and struggle against spiritual powers that limit justice for all through privilege for a few. Robert Williamson says it like this: “This passage from Ephesians ... calls white Christians to relinquish the traditional armor of privilege and power and to replace it with righteousness, faith, and truth.”<sup>3</sup>

Both Paul and today’s writer call us beyond thoughts and prayers to embodied action in the world, a world that is hard for so many. We put on our sneakers, zip up our jackets, and put on our ball cap or sunhat and live out our Christian practice in the world. This takes some figuring out, but it is our call to prayer in a hard world. Let the mosquitoes be your reminder.

### **BREATH PRAYER**

*“You will be my body, my hands and feet and word  
for a world that needs healing and justice and good news.”  
- Jesus in John 14*

### **PRACTICE “ENCIRCLING PRAYER”**

The early Celts savoured the beauty of creation, but they were also so very aware of the the chaotic and threatening forces in their lives and in the life of the world. Many of the songs and blessings call for help in a time of unpredictability and turmoil. The early Celts called on God to circle them. Here is one blessing for you to use on your path as you enact prayers in hard times.

God above me  
God below me,  
God before me  
God behind me  
God inside me  
God outside me  
God is on my path  
And I’m on the path of God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Williamson, “The Politics of White Supremacy”, The Political Theology Network, accessed May 2020, <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-white-supremacy/>

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## 4. FIREFLIES: Praying for Others

### READ MARK 2:1-6

*Then some people came,  
bringing to him a paralyzed man,  
carried by four of them.*

Mark 2:3

### PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Fireflies speak a language of love. They communicate with each other through flash patterns of yellowish light, the result of a chemical reaction in their lower abdomen. Each one has a unique flash and they find each other through their twinkling conversation.

The flashes of these tiny beetles, native to Canada, take me back to childhood and warm summer evenings. My siblings and I would rush out with a mason jar and capture a few to take inside as a natural night light. I'm not sure that ever worked. I regret now interrupting their conversation.

The beauty of a field of fireflies is an awesome sight. Fireflies are a lovely invention of summer. They are Mystery. They are Presence. They are Prayer.

A scene in the movie, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood" moved me. It's where Mr. Rogers is kneeling by his bed with a small black notebook in hand and praying the names of people. It's a simple practice. It is first mentioned by Mrs. Rogers when she tells the reporter that Fred isn't perfect (he gets angry) and praying for people is one of the ways he deals with anger.

We pray for others, sometimes because it is the only way we can cope with our own fear or anger or sense of uselessness. Prayer gives us a space to bring this and to leave it with God so we may rise and act in considered ways.

*"I'll pray for you."* These aren't just words. This is the offering of the gift of carrying the other, of interceding for them. It is a language of love.

The gospel story in Mark tells of four people who were literally carrying their friend and placing him before Jesus. Isn't that a great image of praying for others with body and soul?

Our firefly prayers bring others into Presence. We do so with intention and trust. We hold space. We carry others in prayer. We embody our intercessions with prayer-filled action. It got Jesus' attention. And it was *their* faith that brought healing.

### BREATH PRAYER

*"We are here but a little while to learn to bear the beams of love."*

William Blake

## **PRACTICE “PRAYING FOR OTHERS”**

*This is a guided prayer that uses your imagination and gestures. Find gestures that work for you. There are three sections. Use all three at once or stay with one, repeating it, as often as you wish. My gratitude to Marilyn Burrell for offering this prayer practice.*

Find a comfortable sitting position. Imagine holding the planet in your cupped hands.

With the eyes of your heart, imagine the continents, oceans, mountains, valleys, forests, deserts and plains. Can you see the whole world in your hands?

Imagine all the peoples of Earth: at war, at peace, in need, in plenty, those who are ill, those who are grieving.

Imagine all the creatures of Earth: four legged ones, winged ones, all that crawl, and all that swim.

Take a moment now to attend in prayer to one part of creation for which you have a deep concern.

Breath in a silent prayer for this part of creation. Using your hands offer the planet into the Loving Presence of God and hold it there. Opening your hands, release your concern into God’s loving care, to be loved as only God can love.

Allow your hands to be cupped again. Now hold all the people in your life: family, friends, those at work, in your community of faith, others near and dear to you, even those you are having difficulties with, and those who are often forgotten.

Take a moment now to attend in prayer to someone for which you have a deep concern.

Breath in a silent prayer for this part of creation. Using your hands offer this person into the Loving Presence of God and stay in the moment. Opening your hands, release them into God’s loving care, to be loved as only God can love.

Allow your hands to be cupped again. Take a moment now to pray for yourself. Pour into your hands your feelings: joy, anger, sorrow, fear. Pour into your cupped hands: your doubts, questions, insights, and hopes.

Breath in a silent prayer for yourself. Using your hands, offer your whole self into the Loving Presence of God and stay in the moment. Opening your hands, release yourself into God’s loving care, to be loved as only God can love.