

My Grammy and I have a lot of conversations. Some are not deep at all. We talk about the words we like, whether it's by sound or by meaning. We talk about whether it's better to say "Thank You" or "My Pleasure". But, occasionally, we have a conversation of real substance. There's one conversation I remember where we were in the car and talking about religion. She said, and this is not a direct quote, but something along the lines of, "I believe everyone has an empty hole inside that they need to fill with something, whether it be spirituality, religion, or something harmful". If you are like me, it gets you thinking. People these days, teenagers especially, fill their "empty" with things they think will be fulfilling, but unfortunately, they are not. There are the obvious ones: drugs, alcohol, and partying. But there are new ones that have come along with the new generation: instagram likes, materialistic things, even people. So what have we filled ours with? To me, it's quite a plaguing question. I know there is a lot of different age range here, and some of us may know exactly what we have filled our "empty" with. I think I'm still figuring it out. I know I love writing and reading, I love my family and my friends, and this may be a shock, but I love school. And I do believe that those things have filled up some part of my empty, but there is still some room left. For me, spirituality and religion have been a great guide to filling that inner absence.

Some of you may look forward to church all week. Some of you may be just counting down the minutes until you get to go home. Some of you may be happy to be at church, but you can't help but stress about everything else that has to get done. Some of you may have made church such a casual part of your routine that you didn't even think about coming today. I have been all of these at one point and I'm sure you have too. No matter what the case, everything is dynamic within all of us and our personal religious journey, but one thing remains constant and I find it very comforting: after communion, you can bet on at least 5 people taking the time to pray. Everybody is silent, there are thoughts running through everyone's head, whether they are praying or not. When I was younger, I used to wonder what people were thinking. Was it a formal prayer? Were they just ranting? But I stopped doing that. I found a new comfort in everyone having their own relationship with God, their own thing to pray about. Personally, it got me through a lot. I am only 16 years old and I have had a very lucky and blessed life, but that 5 minute period could still get me through my whole week.

There's a verse from Psalms that reads: "In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears." I think this quote visualizes that direct connection between our thoughts and God. It makes it feel like there is meaning behind our actions. In the reading from John today, Jesus himself is praying and asking God for him to be reached in the way he is reaching God. We ALL do pray, whether we know it or not. Whether it is intentional or not. But why? Why do they want us to pray? What does it do? I've asked myself these questions for a surprisingly long time. Through my eyes, I see it as wisdom. Jesus being aware that ranting to nothing can be painful, but through active listening, we will feel our burdens being carried away. I take a psychology class at my high school and we learned about something called "unconditional positive regard". The term is usually used in parenting, but the basic meaning is the security in feeling loved no matter what. No matter what we say or do, at the end of the day someone will be there to love us, unconditionally. Prayer is another form of God's unconditional positive regard for us.

I like to say that God can be a therapist for those who can't afford one. For example, when you walk through a city and see homeless people on the street, more times than not, they have a Bible verse written on their cardboard or as you walk by, they mutter a "God Bless You." I see this as them finding God's unconditional positive regard. They have been through a lot, but they still feel God's love, most likely through prayer. In the reading from Acts, when Paul and Silas begin to pray and sing, an earthquake releases them from their prison chains. Now, I am not saying that you can go to jail and pray and then be released, but metaphorically, the symbolism is authentic and the faith there is undeniable. When we pray, we are relieving ourselves from our chains. Maybe it's a bad day, an argument with a loved one, the loss of a pet, whatever it may be, we are releasing ourselves.

Praying is something that most of us have grown up with and maybe have let it become an afterthought, but today after communion, if there is anything you need to get off your chest, maybe you need silence, maybe you have never tried praying after communion, maybe it feels uncomfortable, it may be part of your routine, maybe you have been looking forward to this, or maybe you just won't listen to me and that's okay too. Genuinely. But today after communion I implore you to really pray. Pray with the voice of desire that Jesus did. Pray with the passion that Paul and Silas did. Pray because God and Jesus, together in unity, want you to. Pray because we all have that "empty" inside of us, and I firmly believe that we are all here today because we have learned the catharsis in prayer. I'll finish today with a verse from Philippians: "Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication in thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

-Kaylee Braidwood