

Devotional Life and Writing
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Questions & Notes

Session One

Good morning! Can everyone hear me? How are we feeling today? Awake? Are we all here?

A Little Bio

My name is Mary Moerbe. I have been a deaconess for 11 years. I'm a member of Concordia Deaconess Conference. I got my deaconess education with a master's degree program through Fort Wayne.

I have six children whom I homeschool. I'm an entrepreneur. I've recently started LutheranHomeschool.com, which is a place to share free Lutheran educational resources and so folks can sell curriculum they've developed.

I blog at maryjmoerbe.com, where I encourage Lutherans to write, post book reviews, and gather free Lutheran resources to share.

And, as a writer, I have four traditionally published books, namely

- *Family Vocation: God's Calling in Marriage, Parenting, and Childhood,*
- *Blessed: God's Gift of Love,*
- *How Can I Help: God's Calling for Kids;* and
- *Whisper, Whisper: Learning about Church.*

Plus I've self-published a book of poetry titled *Ecclesial Poetry* and I have a children's book on the Trinity being illustrated right now.

I love Jesus, food, and words, and I probably have not had nearly enough coffee yet.

I encourage you to ask your own questions at any time. Feel free to ask questions.

Segue

As for our morning today, our topic is Devotional Life and Writing. Separately each is a big topic and together we'll get to dip into some pretty cool stuff.

I'll say this up front. Writing isn't just for a select few. It's a skill the Church has prized and prioritized for a long time. A large reason for that is because language is a gift from God. To get you thinking, can anyone tell me what *writing* brings to language?

*A way to communicate while apart,
A way to visualize what you're saying,
A way to make language semi-permanent
History experience history*

Writing also lends itself to us *improving* language. Writing a draft means you have all sorts of chances to make changes before actually handing that communication over to someone else.

Are you all with me? In other words, writing is about a lot more than homework and getting through occasional paperwork. I firmly believe the ability to read & write is a gift and skill from God, and that it helps us to *think* clearer, *organize* better, and clarify communication.

I'd like to give you an example of how God uses writing in a neat way. Every once in a while, in the Bible, there will be a name or a term that gets defined. In Mark 15: Jesus cried with a loud voice, "**Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?**" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We may not all learn Aramaic, but writing it down means that we, in whatever translation we use, hear the sounds Jesus made from the cross. It's remarkable. There are also powerful allusions. Who can tell me what an allusion is? *It's an expression that calls something else to mind.* For example, where was Jesus born? Bethlehem. What does that term mean? House of Bread. The Bread of Heaven comes to us via the house of bread. It's just neat and there are allusions and connections all over. Scripture.

Even outside Scripture, vocabulary can be cool. Can anyone tell me what the English word Lord actually meant originally? Loaf-giver. In a settlement large enough to have a mill, there was generally a protector. And isn't our Lord God a loaf-giver, giving the bread of heaven into our very mouths?

Now, some of this gets into speculation. I have no idea whether the English and Germanic word progression is inspired in any way. Still, digging around with written words, you never know what you may find.

So. Speaking of. Who wants to hear the dark history of devotion?

In Ancient Rome, to devote someone was worse than exile. To give a living person to the gods was a curse! It meant it was no longer illegal to kill you. You were essentially sacrificed in a hands-off way. Voted out. Out cast. No longer a full member of the living.

Dark, huh? And yet leave it to Christians to turn that expression on its head! We may be persecuted, we may have a death sentence on our head, but we rejoice because the God we are devoted to is marvelous, merciful, good, and actually Himself involved in our lives!

Christians are a devoted people. Devoted by baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. Devoted by redemption—for we are no longer owned by sin but by our Creator & Savior! And, to the extent to which we can devote ourselves, we do so again and again, in all sorts of ways, throughout our Christian life.

I'm going to ask you a series of questions to get you thinking. We aren't going to answer them all directly.

- *What* are Christians devoted to?
- *How* do we devote ourselves? Or others?
- How do we *live* that way?
- And, although devotion has really shed its connotations with death, how do we, as Christians, live ready to die in the faith?

Big questions. And these have big and little answers. We are devoted to the one true God who has revealed and given us one true faith. How do we devote ourselves? We receive God's gifts. We hear His Word, receive baptism and the Lord's Supper. And . . . we do all sorts of things!

Piety is an overarching term used to gather different religious observances together. Going to church is a form of piety. Bowing your head may be a form of piety. How you hold your hands when you pray.

We are no longer little children. Are we going to get into trouble if you fold your hands a different way? No. Piety helps us to focus, hopefully on Christ and God's Word, but it isn't a law.

A pious person does religious things. Not to earn heaven. Not because he or she is showing off—that would be false piety. In Lutheran terms, we do things because we need God. We go to church to hear His Word, receive His absolution and His supper. We close our eyes when we pray because there are so many things that can catch our eye and distract us from focusing on God and His precious promise to hear our prayers and provide all we need.

Is a pious person automatically “super religious”? I don't think so, though I don't see anything wrong with being super religious when it's the religion of God's mercy in Jesus and the atonement of the world.

But let's brainstorm a little. **What are little religious things we do on a regular basis?** Do you know the Lord's Prayer? Do you ever pray it? Anything else?

- Making the sign of the cross
- Folding hands to pray
- Kneeling to pray or confess
- Going to church
- Keeping crosses and crucifixes where we can see them
- Considering the 10 Commandments!
- Treating God's Word well, not sitting or stepping onto Bibles, right?
- Being quiet to listen to God's Word

Many of us were taught to watch our language and not to curse or swear, right? There are several reasons behind that. But avoiding saying *religious* words as *cuss* words counts as a form of piety. Don't say God unless you actually mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Right? Can you see how there is a *religious* practice because something *religious* is involved?

In Old Testament times, some Israelites were so pious that they would only say LORD instead of speak the name of God—they did not want to call upon the Lord's Name in vain in any conceivable way! That's why, in many Bibles, sometimes there is the word Lord, with the first letter capitalized. Other times the whole word is in capital letters, because it stands in the place of the “tetragrammaton,” the four Hebrew consonants that spell out the Lord's Name. Essentially some piously used the title Adonai, Lord.

By the way, Hebrew is awesome. Instead of reading from left to right, you read it from right to left, AND ancient Hebrew didn't write down any vowels. Now people have put together something called pointed Hebrew, which includes vowel markings, but they aren't actually letters. It's pretty sweet.

Can anyone tell me the Name of God? Yahweh, “I am that I am.” “I am who I am.” “I am

“Yah” makes it explicitly into our very own, present day devotional life on a pretty common basis. Any guess how? Allelujah means praise to Yah or Yahwey!

There are a *lot* of ways that religious things make their way into every aspect of our lives. We don't even know. Goodbye? Comes from “God be with ye.” Adios? Is a blessing wishing a person “to God,” *a Dios*.

So, great news. You are not only surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, as Hebrews 12:1 puts it. “[Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.]”

But you’ll notice it’s surprisingly easy to use words without knowing their meanings. We take things for granted to such an extent that it is *human* to overlook tools of piety. We want big, splashy, obvious things, when God, again and again, falls back on a few particular gifts. And what are those?

The Means of Grace, Word & Sacrament. Now, let’s add daily bread and creation, and you’ve got God’s gifts pretty well covered. But let’s get more specifically to *Jesus*. To the *Gospel*. To the hope and strength we cling to as we live in a very fallen, challenging world.

There are ways to practice forms of piety that emphasize the self, that can be seen as self-righteous, holier-than-thou. In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, both men went to temple to pray. One humbled begged for mercy from God—and God exalted the tax collector. The other was too full of himself, too full of his actions, to pay attention to God and His Word. Being devoted to self is *not* the same as being devoted to *God*.

Piety doesn’t save. Neither do reminders, habits, or intentions. They have good uses (!), but only when they are tied to what does save us: Christ, our Savior! God’s Words of eternal life! And, in the words of the Small Catechism, the “Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word.”

In the same way, devotional time—even if it’s Bible reading—isn’t just about what we do, but what God does for us in His Son and His Word.

Our topic for today isn’t about checklists for self-righteousness. It’s about life and living that life recognizing Scriptural truths throughout it.

What are things we do in our Christian lives? Because odds are anything we list falls into devotional life. Let’s take a few minutes and brainstorm. What are things we do as part of our Christian lives?

How is writing involved in these things?

How can writing be involved in these things?

Confession

Sermon notes

Bible questions

Prayer!

Reading Christian literature: fiction, non-fiction, hymnody, commentaries, etc.

Pick up a hymnal and you’ll feel the weight of a treasure in your hands.

We have writings, songs, poetry & prayers going back to Moses and that writing has never stopped. Does that mean everything is equal to Scripture? No, but some really great stuff has survived!

Did you know you can read the confession of St. Patrick? Google it. It’s awesome.

Have you ever heard of Augustine? He’s a pretty big name. Well, guess what. His pastor, back in the 300s, wrote a hymn that we still sing in Advent! Savior of the Nations, Come. One legend suggests it

could have been a birthday present or something for Augustine! But it's beautiful. It tells the story of salvation and incarnation, fighting heresies from that day.

The Church has, in my opinion, a spectacularly glorious history with words & with writing.

Quick vocab check. Can I tell you what Scripture means? Writing. Can I tell you what Bible means? Book. These are because they are the holy writings and the good, or sacred, book. Trivia, I know, but,

Christians are people of *the* Word and people of words. Sure, there are linguistic differences. Did you know that not every language can rhyme? But English can. English also has stressed and unstressed syllables so that we can be rhythmic, making pitter patter patterns or anything else. Other languages have advantages, too, we don't need to get into all of that.

As Lutherans, we emphasize that faith comes from hearing and hearing only by the Word of God! And, not only that, our very bodies and the planet we stand on were formed by the Word of God with life from the breath of His mouth.

Even after thousands of years, there are languages which are not written, yet God provided a way for His Word to kept exactly as He desired it. Occasional sloppy handwriting? Perhaps. But we get to have a careful, detailed record of what God has revealed to the prophets, what Christ taught to the apostles. As 2 Peter says, "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (1:21) and we get to give thanks to God that these were *written down* for the ages.

It is no coincidence that the Israelites and then the Christians were literate people. They wanted to be able to *read* God's Word as well as listen to it. And Christianity has gone on to write much of the most famous literature in all the world.

And, of course, now Christians write all sorts of things. Let's take a minute to brainstorm:

Novels, fiction, poetry, plays, tv shows, movies, prayers, sermons, academic books, etc.

If you are a writer who gravitates toward fiction, you may get a lot out of incorporating mercy, sacrifice, and divine intervention into stories.

If you don't consider yourself a writer, you're still probably going to write periodically for the rest of your life. Notes, lists, emails, Christmas cards, you name it. And what I'm going to add to that is that you can work on writing your own special prayers and insights. You can write up your own encouragements from Scripture, applying God's Word directly to yourself.

Do I mean stop going to church? No! But when you're at Bible study, think about taking notes! Write down questions you come up with. Try to find allusions. Think about the words and even the punctuation that's there.

In high school, I started a prayer journal. There weren't anything fancy—almost like a diary, really—but it kept me focused on God and His Word.

If you're open to an assignment, here's one. Think about what you fear the most for yourself and write a single sentence prayer to God about it. Write it down, somewhere privately is fine, but then it's ready and at your fingertips if you ever start to tense up and not know what to pray.

Little things like that can be a helpful part of your devotional life. After all, this is devotional *life*, which is more than just a devotional 15 minutes or devotional reading.

For the sake of this class, I thought we could work on writing some prayers. Though I'd be happy to talk about hymnody, devotions, or writing other things, too.

Recommended Resources

Around the Word weekly devotions

Handbook of Consolations & The Daily Exercise of Piety by Johann Gerhard

Session Two

So many of the Words that God has given to us prepare us for the times we hate to think about: times of death, guilt, doubt, fear, loss of control, and dismay. Now, I don't want you to think that that means Christianity is a downer. My point is that God gives us just what we need, now and no matter what is coming.

He gives us words and we get to use those words.

We can hate death. We can hate uncertainty. Hatred. Loneliness. Judgment. We can hate them. But thanks be to God we can also talk *through* them. We can prepare ourselves a bit for things to come. We can be soothed by not only God's Words but also millions of words inspired by God's Word. And we can help to spread God's comfort.

Really, it's a tremendous thing. We read Scripture, but Scripture also very much reads us. Individually and as a society. Which brings us to another relevant term!

Confession

Confession. What does confession mean? When do we *confess*?

Another way to . . . summarize confession is to say, "You're right. I agree with you. My words are on your side." The root, the origin, means "to speak or declare *with*."

Write that down. Confession=I agree. It's more profound than you realize. Confession is not limited to whether or not you'd done something wrong. We are literally speaking *with the Holy Spirit* when we confess, "Hallelujah! Christ is risen!" And that's exactly a model. God reveals and we shout it back with joy! He speaks and we eat it up and speak it back out.

The whole Bible is something we can confess. We get to join our words to God's! That's a big deal!

Praise

I've got a good example of how we can say back to God what He says to us. It's praise. Yes, we could walk around saying, "Yay, yay, yay, yay," and maybe some folks would think that's praise. But Christian praise is more specific than that. We praise you, Lord, for your righteousness, holiness, mercy, actions in history.

Praise isn't just an expression of a person's feelings. It highlights a quality or accomplishments.

God is the source of all beauty. We can describe His works. God is the source of all goodness. We can be specific in our thanksgiving and requests.

AND, this is an important point, *devotional materials move beyond our own thoughts and feelings to give us God's Word & Jesus*. Because we are not called to be devoted to ourselves, our own understanding or experiences. We are called to be devoted to the Triune God and His Word. As sinners, we need to repent—which means to turn 180 degrees to look back where we need to!

Praise can be devotional, if it gets back to the life and death matters of salvation.

Fiction can be devotional, although obviously it isn't always cut as cleanly.

Poetry is something that I find downright theologically therapeutic. I jot down notes & insights from Scripture and sermons and see what I can do when I flesh them out.

But can anyone tell me why we have to be careful about speculation? Why isn't speculation devotional? It's wondering about things God hasn't revealed. It points away from God's revelation.

Shaped by Words

As Christians, we are formed by words. Literally and figuratively. And God's Word calls us to reflect what we're read and heard from Him. The Church often gives us words to say before we realize how great those words are. Because the words are from Scripture. As Christians, we grow into them.

We are called to meditate on the revelations and gifts of God. At the same time, this is not all about brain work. There is a beautiful intimacy in, say, a family language. And we have that in the church. Around our potlucks? Maybe. But sing the praises of the psalms and you're joining choirs of angels and Christians around the world and throughout all time!

Think about it. We have been given words that we will literally grow into for all eternity. Not one jot or tittle—not a dot or a point—no dotting for an I or crossing of a t will diminish from the God who speaks it!

There is a reciprocal relationship between God's Word & the Church's Word. Ok? Speaking practically, there are also reciprocal relationships between what we ourselves read, speak, and write.

I'm not saying you will cuss if you watch a movie with slang. I am saying that you won't speak in biblical terms if you aren't hearing and reading it. The mountains will cry out – and I'm not saying you have to use that phrase on a daily basis—but if you aren't in the Good Book for a while, it's just not going to make a lot of sense.

Writing—even just by taking notes—helps to solidify knowledge in your brain. So writing Christian stuff? Helpful.

There is nothing in the world that should hold you back from saying back what you've heard. It's great. You don't have to be super-creative, brilliant-insightful. You can just . . . learn to say what you mean. Learn to say what's helpful when someone's scared. Or needing a prayer. Or a paraphrased psalm.

Now, there are nerves. There's lack of training—don't even get me started on the state of education. There's lack of confidence. But. There's *Jesus*. There's an entire cosmic reality that language underlies . . . everything. Ok? I won't *make* you write. I won't *make* you speak. But a voice is there, waiting for you to develop it. You absolutely can confess. Out-loud. In writing. Publicly. Privately. With friends or a stranger. You can.

But guess what makes it easier? Jot a few down beforehand. Right? Even if someone wants you to pray for them out loud. Spur of the moment. Dig a pen out, think for a few seconds. Search your mind for some Scripture or a specific promise of God, because *that's* the kind of thing that's super helpful! That and your willingness to be with someone even when it's awkward.

Ah, so much is awkward in life. Yet we all live through it! *Through it*. Not going around it.

Fear you'll spout heresy? Say the wrong thing? Go too far? Write it down, shoot it off in an email to your pastor. Or another Christian friend.

Life is a draft. We keep making changes as we go along. We self-edit and if we suddenly have to back pedal? There are way worse things in the world!

Who can tell me what it means to encourage? To help, support. Doesn't it also basically mean to *give* courage? What if courage is *not* about what's inside you, but what has been *given* to you? Courage comes from the Latin for heart. Now, we have modern connotations with the heart that the ancients had about the stomach and guts. :D But you know what? In the Incarnation, our Lord and Savior, the very Son of God Himself, took on flesh—a human heart, human guts, human feeling--so that we can be forgiven and eternally joined to Him.

Another Tactic

Here's another devotional choice you can make. Stand on the shoulders of giants! I want you to be comfortable saying your own prayers—recognizing what your heart likely already prays and finetuning it by adding more Jesus, but we are also free to use writings from the past as perfect words for us, too.

There is a guy. His name is John Chrysostom. I say is because he is alive with Jesus. He died in 407. Chrysostom? I'll spell it. Means golden-mouthed. The church has *a lot* of beautiful resources for all of us.

Where can you find prayers, for yourself or others?
Hymnal, devotional books, study Bibles, Bible

Here's a resource for you: acollectionofprayers.com. It's super interesting. *Tons* of prayers gathered by a Lutheran pastor of the Wisconsin Evangelical Synod, Paul Stratman. He just started gathering prayers one day and when he realized how many were in the public domain, he made a website. How awesome is that? One guy making a difference!

And you'll make a difference too. I don't know how or when. But we all do. God works His Will through us—often despite us—and every day more of His love is shared.

I want you to feel good about writing your own prayers. I would love for this to be a room full of the next generation of Lutheran novelists, hymnists, academics, and generally loving, articulate people. The world can only benefit from more clarity and more beauty in service to Christ. Still. We get to stand on the shoulders of giants! In church. At home. In our reading, prayer, song, etc.

Prayers

So let's get to prayers! This isn't quite a format where I can walk around and give individual advice. Sorry. No peering over your shoulders from me today. But I'm going to read two prayers and we'll see what you think. (No. They won't be heretical and tests. Listen to the language.)

A morning prayer:

I arise in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ, the crucified,
who has redeemed me with his precious blood.
May he guard me from evil,
preserve me in body and soul,

and give me what will further and strengthen me
in all good to everlasting life.

Source: Freely adapted from *Seed Grains of Prayer, A Manual for Evangelical Christians*, Wartburg Press, Chicago, 1914 #106. Also found here: *A Lutheran Prayer Book*, ed. Doberstein, © 1960 Muehlenberg Press, Philadelphia

This prayer is not in a typical prayer format, and you know what? That's ok. It was either written or gathered by Wilhelm Loehe for his own prayer collection book, *Seed Grains of Prayer*. By the way, Loehe, though not perfect, is a father of deaconesses and very influential over the CTS deaconess program. My oldest daughter? We named her Elizabeth Loehe. He's pretty impressive in a lot of ways!

Next I'll read one in a format you may recognize:

O God,
you have folded back the cover of the night
to clothe us in the golden glory of the day.
Chase from our hearts all gloomy thoughts,
and make us glad with the brightness of hope,
that we may effectively aspire to promised virtues;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Source: An Ancient Collect, sixth century. Source of this version: Freely modified from *Prayers of the Early Church*, edited by J. Manning Potts, 1953.
<https://acollectionofprayers.com/2018/09/05/for-morning/>

Can anyone name the format? Or do I need to sing it? :D This is a prayer from the sixth century, written to be sung in church. Collects collect the themes and allusions of the lectionary to sum up in prayer.

It might strike some of you as formal, but it is a tremendously helpful format. First, you name whom you address. O Lord. Father in Heaven. Something like that. Then, before you make any sort of request, you say why specifically you are coming to Him. Then you make your request, plea, personal praise, whatever. You wrap it up with a liturgical closing, such as "in your name we pray." See? Everyone is more liturgical than they realize.

Take a few minutes. I want you to write up a couple of lists. First, ways to address God. Second, either things He has done or qualities He has revealed about Himself—you know, like, "You know all things." Third, requests *resulting* from the previous list. So it isn't "You know all things, so help me pass this math test. It's You know all things. Encourage my friend. I don't know what's going on with her." If you'd like, you can write a fourth column for closings: "through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen." Etc.

Promises, blessings, stories of Jesus

I'm going to point out that all prayers used to be spoken out loud! That's why there's that kind of funny verse, Matthew 6:6, about praying in a closet! Don't be showy or obnoxious, but if you read through the Old and New Testaments, you're going to see that prayers also proclaim. Prayers are *not* only private. They are also corporate, communal. Shared!

Don't let any part of your devotional life get hung up on me, myself, and I. Remember God and all His attribute and accomplishments. Face your deep dark needs precisely because you have a God who is up for getting you through them. And beyond them. To be with Him and His Son forever and forever. Thanks be to God.

The Lord's Prayer is the perfect prayer. I'm pretty sure Luther urged us to pray it at least 5 times a day, not counting Sundays or daily church.

You've probably be taught other formats for prayers, like ACTS: Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

Pray the Psalms! Jesus sure did!

Raise your hand if you've heard you can pray the catechism? John Pless and Matthew Harrison have some great books out for that. Titles include *Praying Luther's Small Catechism* and *Why I am Joyfully Lutheran?* The Small Catechism isn't long and you can't outgrow it. You can pray it in probably 15 minutes or less, and I know folks who have prayed it on a daily basis.

Hymns? Are often prayers. Or are just plain devotional and good for your Christian life.

Some folks like to have artwork like a crucifix or icon to help them focus in either prayer or devotions. Some folks advocate prayer walks.

Extra Notes

Language is a gift from God. It is more than a tool and therefore there will always be more to it than what we can work out of it. Speak so it can be heard. Let your words carry the argument rather than your passion. And we get to use our words, not to *refer* to Jesus, but to *give* the very real hope we now have.

English stuff:

Imagery/metaphors/similes

Alliteration is when the first sound of a word gets repeated close by. It's like a rhyme only at the beginning of a word, which works with vowels and consonants.

Christian freedom affects how we use words. Poetic license affects how we use words.

There are some great lines in the Paul Gerhardt hymn, “Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me” (LSB 756): “He who knows, All my woes, Knows how best to end them.” Paul Gerhardt is not Johan Gerhard. Paul Gerhardt with a Reformation theologian, pastor, and hymnodist.

As Christians, we get to have the heart of Jesus—even if He sometimes overturned tables in the temple courtyard. We strive for the mind of Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:6

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 4:7

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.