

July 24, 2016
Luke 11:1-13
Teach Us To Pray
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Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him bread because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

When I was seven years old, I broke my arm. It didn't heal very well. Here's the story: I have two big brothers, nine and ten years older. Each of them got a really nice English three-speed bicycle for their tenth birthday, and the same was promised to me. But I couldn't wait. As the spoiled baby sister (and yes, that's an accurate description) I wanted a bike at age seven. I begged and pleaded and whined and pestered my parents for a bike until they finally gave in, and for my 7th birthday in April there was a one-speed small blue bike. With Dad's help I learned to ride it on the back lawn. Soon the training wheels were off and I rode it on the sidewalks in front of our house. Just before school let out for the summer, I took a bad fall and broke my right arm,

almost a compound fracture, and had to be in a hot sweaty cast for most of the summer. No swimming for me which was more than enough punishment.

In retrospect my parents were certainly the wiser. Giving in to the annoying pleadings of our children is not always the best policy. Yet, it seems that is exactly what the parable we just heard from Luke is saying: Persist. Persist in asking, begging, and pleading and eventually you get what you want. Is that the lesson Jesus intends for us? I've always struggled with this passage, because it seems to reduce prayer to one phrase: "Ask and you shall receive." If that is our only practice of prayer, we have more to learn.

What is the context of Jesus' teaching about prayer? He and his disciples have been wandering around Galilee, teaching, healing, preaching. Then one of them says, "Teach us how to pray, as John did for his disciples."

Jesus probably heard that request in two ways: first, he heard the hint of competitiveness with "John's team" of disciples. There were many such groups wandering around. We might say that Jesus' disciple was asking for a "brand name" and team tee-shirts, their own logo. Can't you just imagine them asking for the advertising jingle. "Make Palestine great again" or something similar.

Let's give them the benefit of the doubt, though. Those following Jesus were not scholars or priests or teachers: they were ordinary people who had been observing him as he took time apart by himself to pray. Maybe they wanted what he had, a close relationship with God. Maybe they were afraid to "pray incorrectly". Maybe they worried about making a fool of themselves in public. Maybe they didn't know what to ask of God.

"Teach us how to pray, so we do it right. "

Many of us here this morning have felt the same way. I'll tell you a secret: most of us professionals had similar worries when we started out as ordained pastors. What is prayer? Do I do it enough? Do I have the skills to make it up as I go, or should I memorize everything? These are not little concerns. Last week our excellent lay preacher, Gail Compton, admitted in the

sermon that she went to the Stevens Ministry leader saying “I don’t know how to pray.” Jean encouraged her by saying that her actions had been her prayer all along.

For me, the takeaway in that story is that prayer can be many things, all of which are based in growing closer to God and ultimately, leading us to listen more closely to God’s guiding spirit.

Jesus is always disappearing up on the mountain to pray. What does he do up there anyway? Does he carry a laundry list of the things he needs, or the people he is worried about? Jesus does more listening than talking. Maybe it’s more like an alignment check. OK, God, check my tires. Are they pointed in the way you would have me go? Prayer is what recharges Jesus, what opens him to God’s movement and Spirit, in his life and work.

Rev. Rob Voyle of the Clergy Leadership Institute says it this way: “The whole point of prayer is not to get stuff, or to change other people, or to change ourselves even - but rather to abide in the Spirit. “

But it is hard to let go of the notion that prayer is mostly about asking for what we want. At some level, we are all still seven year olds who crave a bicycle. Letting go of ego and desire is the hardest part of the spiritual journey.

Frankly, I’m not very impressed by Jesus’ parable example of prayer in today’s reading, because it does seem to promise that persistence in asking will eventually pay off. Sometimes it does: it did it did for me and the bicycle. But why when we persistently pray for peace, or for justice, or for protection from terrorism, does it seem we are not answered?

Some of you know my love for words, and often when faced with a puzzle like this, I go back to look at the word in its original Greek or Hebrew. The parable says: “Because of his persistence” as translated into English. The Greek word, however, “anaideia” is found only here in all the Bible. Language scholars say it means something closer to shamelessness or impudence – a lack of modesty. The man who has a visitor in the middle of the night feels great urgency to fulfill his duty of hospitality by feeding his guest, even tho’ it is the middle of the night. So he is not

modest or shy in asking for help. We might call him brazen or minimally, disrespectful, in knocking at such a strange hour. Yet it is this very quality which Jesus wants us to notice. The text doesn't say that he pounded on the door or yelled or made a nuisance of himself in the ways we might think. He simply made a reasonable – if untimely - request for a loan.. The neighbor responds not because he's tired of the shouting or the knocking, but rather because it's the right thing to do, because he himself would be ashamed not to respond according to hospitality which God teaches.

Jesus seems to say that praying is about being WILLING to ask, being unafraid to state our condition as it exists. We often don't like to admit, even to ourselves, that our prayers of asking are really about us. They are in the third person. They are distant. Nevertheless, what God hears is what is really on our heart whether or not there are words spoken.

So here's another odd thing, if we work backwards into this text. A prayer of petition means asking for something. And you know what?

The entire Lord's prayer consists of petitions. There is nothing in it about adoration or confession or thanksgiving, other elements we think there should be in prayer. Just pure imperatives.

Jesus models a disciples prayer which is an unashamed, even impudent, conversation with God about the state of our being. Prayer is a continuous state of openness to communication. If we pray for what is indeed our hearts' desire – not just some third party request we'd like to have - then it must be constantly in mind, we must live with it before the eyes of our hearts, we must keep it close to the way we are acting in each moment. Here's the thing: what makes prayer work is that it keeps us in tune with God and God's purpose for the world.

Many of us, including ministers, may ask ourselves if we really pray. There are physical disciplines of time or position that may be helpful: kneeling at our bedside, or prostrating ourselves on a prayer rug, or attending several services a day if we are in a monastery or walking the labyrinth. But the real ideal is to pray always: to keep the desire of being in sync with God's will, God's purpose, forefront in your thoughts. As often as you can, in the midst of your anger

or your despair, or even your elation and your content, ask yourself if it is indeed God's will, and attempt to align yourself accordingly.

The last part of Luke's passage is a collection of wisdom sayings: in them, a child asks not for something frivolous like a bicycle, but for the basic stuff of life: a fish. An egg. In King James it says the child asks for bread. A parent would never respond with something that is at best useless and at worst dangerous, like a stone or a snake or a scorpion. The child trusts the parent for goodness. As the parent we may not always give exactly what was asked for, there might be a reasonable substitution like chicken instead of fish, or yogurt instead of an egg. But we do our best.

Likewise, we remain open to the way in which God answers us in prayer. Our petitions are often like my request for a bicycle: rather frivolous and not needed for basic survival. We ask for something very particular and feel the answer must come in exactly that form, without the slightest change, or our prayer has not been answered.

The important element of prayer is that we are invited into a truly trusting, intimate relationship with God, the one we call Abba, Father. It is appropriate to be impudent and direct in prayer: but in return, we must be ready for whatever response comes, even if it's unexpected. We wait for God's response with open mind and heart. We pray for bread, but are grateful for whatever we get.

The prayer which Jesus teaches us is very simple and to the point: immodest, even straightforward. But what kind of petitions? You may not have noticed: the Lord's prayer is not about individual petitions, but communal ones: it is about the disciples as a group. The pronouns are first person plural: OUR father, OUR debts, OUR daily bread.

We ask for bread to feed ourselves physically; but from the earliest days of Christianity, bread also meant spiritual nurture for the church community. It meant knocking on God's door asking to be nourished in spirit.

The Lord's prayer teaches us that it is good to be in common conversation with God, as if God were sitting around the table with us. It is good to ask for what we need. As Yankees it is not so easy for us. We don't like having to ask someone else for something, but would prefer to be entirely self-sufficient and independent, without needing anything outside of ourselves.

The Lord's Prayer takes us against the grain. It says its ok to ask. It's ok to be impudent. It's not about pretending to be self-sufficient. God already knows our needs and our thoughts and our desires,

Several years ago I had the opportunity to go on a wonderful ecological retreat at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. The regular worship team there at this Presbyterian Camp is called "Casa del Sol" or house of the sun. It is led in the summer by a superb Scottish Presbyterian pastor named John Philip Newell. In closing, I share his version of the Lord's prayer:

Ground of all being

Mother of life, Father of the universe

Your name is sacred, beyond speaking

May we know your presence,

May your longings be our longings in heart and action.

May there be food for the human family today, and for the whole earth community, Forgive us the falseness of what we have done

As we forgive those who are untrue to us.

Do not forsake us in our time of conflict

But lead us into new beginnings.

For the light of life, the vitality of life, and the glory of life are yours now and forever. Amen.

Psalm 138

1 I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;

2 I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.

3 On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.

4 All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth.

5 They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord.

6 For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.

7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.

8 The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Words of Assurance

Christ taught us to pray “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” We call upon the Lord, and we are heard. Today in the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Alleluia. Amen. Go forth and forgive those indebted to you.

Call to Offering

On a daily basis most of us are given much more than just the bread that we need. Out of this abundance let us give back what truly belongs to God.

Benediction

In the gift of this day may we be open to new beginnings.

May our eyes be open to new ways of seeing.

May our hearts be open to God’s love and laughter.

Guide us, Creator Christ and Spirit,

That in the matter of our lives we may be bearers of hope. Amen.