

“Teach Us to Pray”

Luke 11:1-13

Sunday, July 25, 2010—Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Rev. Judy Landt, Vernon Presbyterian Church

One of the pastor’s websites I frequent warned me that if I preached on Luke’s version of the Lord’s prayer today, I’d better set aside plenty of time next week for those who want to talk, rant, and ask questions. Prayer is that kind of topic, if we’re honest about it. There’s just an awful lot about it that is very hard to understand. If God already knows all our needs, why should we bother praying about them? Doesn’t that amount to telling God what God already knows, sort of like my dentist’s office that keeps harassing me with reminders about appointments I am well aware of? Is God selective in answering prayers? Is it really possible that God would answer a prayer for a parking place when someone is running late for an appointment, yet ignore the prayers of an innocent child who suffers years of abuse at the hands of an adult? If prayers are always answered, how are we to understand our loved ones who died of cancer despite our prayers? Was it something we said or did wrong, or was God just on vacation when we were praying?

I’ll give my disclaimer at the outset, I probably won’t be able to answer these questions to anyone’s great satisfaction this morning. When it comes to God and our relationship with God, more often than not there are no simple, easy, or obvious answers. I think we need to hear that it is not wrong, disrespectful or unfaithful to ask difficult and perplexing questions about God. I think we need to hear that God will not strike us dead for voicing our questions and expressing our doubts. When we admit to having questions to which there are no obvious answers, it only honors God who created us with the capacity to ask why and the desire to know more. So if anyone wants to talk, rant, or raise more questions about prayer during the coming week, be assured that you’ll be welcome.

Teach us to pray, the disciples ask Jesus. What was it they really wanted? It wasn’t the right formula or technique they were looking for. It wasn’t that they thought Jesus had special secrets to share about the proper words, the right posture, or some special prayer location that would assure prayer success. They were observant Jews, they knew all that very well. What they saw in Jesus was something different. Writing in a recent issue of *Christian Century*, Lutheran pastor and author Peter Marty says: “Jesus’ companions continuously witnessed his special attachment to the Father. (They) yearned for similar closeness. Behind their simple request was a longing: “Lord, teach us how to love and trust the Father the way you do, that our prayer lives would increase in fullness and honesty.” (July 15, 2010, p. 21).

Prayer, then, is not first and foremost about asking for things. Prayer is first and foremost about our relationship with God, and our desire to deepen it. Let’s read Luke’s version of the Lord’s prayer, with this in mind.

Jesus begins by addressing God by name. Father is the name he uses. Think about that. There are hundreds of names for God that Jesus might have picked...Holy One, Almighty and All-Knowing God, Creator, Ruler of the Universe, King of Kings...but Jesus starts his prayer by addressing God as Father. Why? He is speaking to God who loves and cares for us like a parent. The parent-child relationship is the closest, the most formative, the most intimate relationship we know on earth. I remember once going through an album of my baby pictures and being drawn

back again and again to a picture of myself at about six months old, sitting on my father's lap. The two of us were looking at each other with expressions I can only describe as—how to say it? Mutual adoration? That's the kind of relationship God wants with us. Prayer is the language of that relationship. It is the way we communicate with God who knows us and cares for us, like the most loving and devoted of parents. So think about how you name God when you pray. It doesn't matter what name you use. Does the name you use reflect your desire for closeness with God?

*Hallowed be your name.* Eugene Peterson translates this phrase as “reveal who you are.” When we pray for God's name to be hallowed, we're saying we want to know God as God really is, and we want God to be honored everywhere, beginning with our own hearts. We are asking that the way we live our lives will bring honor and glory to God.

If you want to come closer to God, pay attention to what you pray for. Pray for the things we know are important to God. *Your kingdom come.* To ask for the coming of God's kingdom is to look ahead to the time when God will fully and completely rule the world as well as our own hearts, a time of peace, love, justice, and abundance for all people. When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are praying not just for our own radical transformation, we are praying for the radical transformation the world. And we are praying that we will hear and respond to God's call, to participate actively, as a partner, in making the Kingdom a reality.

Focus on needs, not wants, when you pray. *Give us each day our daily bread.* We pray that God will meet our needs for today, understanding that tomorrow is promised to no one. When we pray, we express our trust that God will take care of our physical, emotional and spiritual needs, as God has promised.

If we want to come closer to God, start by being honest with God about who we really are and how we really live. *Forgive us our sins.* Not to state the obvious, but this assumes a willingness to understand ourselves as people who sin. I find a lot of folks today just don't see themselves that way. They think sin only refers to behavior that nineteenth century prudes liked to tsk-tsk-tsk about, or that it's some doctrine the church invented to make people feel guilty and ashamed, or that it's someone else's problem but not theirs. They don't think there's anything in their lives for which they need to be forgiven. But sin isn't primarily about breaking rules and doing bad things, and to say we sin doesn't mean we're bad people. Quite the contrary, the Scriptures state that we were created good and in the image of God. Sin is primarily about the way we distort God's image by trying to be our own gods, acting as though everything depends on us, living as though we are accountable to no one and have no one to thank but ourselves for our many blessings. A deeper relationship with God begins with an honest and truthful understanding of who we are.

We are people whom God dearly and passionately loves, with all our warts and faults. We are people whom God has graciously forgiven in Christ, something we never could earn or do for ourselves. If that understanding is not the starting point for our prayers, then our prayers are not much more than requests for God to do magic tricks, and God becomes something like a divine slot machine. We put in the right words, out comes whatever it is we want, love, money, success. No muss, no fuss, no waiting, no relationship necessary.

God, forgive us—for treating you like a genie in a bottle. For the careless way we treat each other. For the hard heartedness with which we judge and criticize each other. For the way we look down on and look away from those in need. Give us the grace to be able to deal with others as you have dealt with us. May we live in ways that truly express our gratitude for what you have done for us. That is the heart of Christian prayer.

Jesus encourages us to pray both with passion and with persistence. That's the point of the story he tells about the man whose cupboard is empty when guests come to visit; so he goes to his neighbor's house in the middle of the night, desperately seeking some bread so he can offer proper hospitality to the visitor. The first response he gets is, go away, it's the middle of the night; but after persistent asking, the sleeping neighbor comes through. I don't think Jesus is saying that God is like a sleeping neighbor who will only grudgingly agree to do our bidding if we keep after him. I do think he's making a point about how we pray. Pray for what really matters to you. Pray as though your life and your reputation depended on it, pray and don't give up. Bring your true self, your whole self, your needy self to God in prayer. That's what the man in the story did. I can imagine him yelling: You've got to help me! I'll be humiliated before the whole neighborhood if I can't offer dinner to my friend. He's been travelling for days to get here, he's hungry and exhausted. Please. He needs something from me, and you're my only hope to be able to provide it.

This is something we have a hard time doing. We don't like neediness in any way, shape or form. We tend to think that our neediness, not to mention our anger, our frustrations, and our impatience, make us unworthy of God's attention. We figure God only listens to polite, happy, self-sufficient people who ask nicely, so we sanitize our prayers and say them with all the passion of a postal official reading a bill of lading. Sometimes we don't bring our real selves to our prayers at all. If you read the Psalms, which are prayers that Jesus regularly prayed, you will see they are filled with the full range of raw emotions: anger, fear, hurt, the desire for revenge, all of them are brought before God in prayer. Maybe we have it all wrong. Maybe we need to come to prayer not with our best foot forward, but with all our worst feelings in hand. In his book on prayer, Philip Yancey says, "A sense of unworthiness hardly disqualifies me from prayer; rather, it serves as a necessary starting point. Apart from feeling unworthy, why call on God in the first place?" (p. 185)

Pray about what you really care about, let God hear your true and honest feelings, and do it persistently.

Jesus assures us our prayers will be answered: Ask, and it will be given to you; search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. This may sound like a blank check, but we know, of course, that it doesn't work that way. Sometimes the biopsy is positive. Sometimes the job interview doesn't lead to an offer. Sometimes marriages break up, adolescents take terrible risks, children continue to be abused and cancer kills despite the most persistent and passionate of prayers. We don't know why. What I think we do know is that unanswered prayers don't mean we weren't good enough for God to listen to, or that God ignored us because we didn't use the right words or lacked proper prayer techniques.

But now Jesus suddenly startles us by saying, let me tell you the way prayer is always answered. God always gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. And this brings us back to one of the thoughts with which we began. Prayer is first and foremost about our relationship with God.

*Ask, search, knock.* You can be certain God will answer with the gift of the Holy Spirit—God’s own self.

God does not always change our circumstances, but God gives us the Holy Spirit to be with us and to help us cope.

When we are in grief, the Holy Spirit is our power to heal.

And when relationships are broken, the Holy Spirit is our power to forgive and to be forgiven.

And when we are lost, the Holy Spirit is the power to find our way.

And when we are in anguish, the Holy Spirit assures us that we are not alone, that the God from whom we cannot be separated is also one who has cried out in anguish and been met with silence.

*Ask, search, knock.* The only way to be a failure at prayer is not to show up.

Philip Yancey tells the story of his friend Ben, a man who ruptured a disk in his back and was prescribed six weeks of total bed rest. Bored and frustrated, he prayed for his church. He prayed for every member of the church, by name, every day. It took hours. He figured that was all he could do, and so he did it. But over time, the time spent in prayer became precious and sweet. Towards the end of the six weeks, he prayed, “You know God, this time we’ve spent together has been wonderful. It’s too bad I don’t have time to do this when I’m well.” Almost immediately he imagined God’s response: “Ben, you have just as much time when you’re well as when you’re sick. It’s the same twenty-four hours in either case. The trouble with you is that when you’re well, you think you’re in charge. When you’re sick, you know you’re not.”

The real purpose of prayer is to bring us closer to God. That’s a prayer that God is always faithful to answer. So take the time to pray. Pray with the confidence that God is always faithful to respond by giving us God’s own self. Don’t wait until you or someone you love is sick or some crisis reminds you that you really are not the one in charge. Speak to God now of the joy, the pain, the fear, and the hope of being human. Give thanks for God’s good gifts. Ask sincerely and honestly for what you truly need. Knock with all the passion you can muster. Search persistently, shamelessly, as though your life depended on it. Because it does.

Thanks be to God. Amen.