

“A Life of Prayer”

Luke 11:1-13 and 18:1-8

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Anyone who has ever moved to a new community knows how long it takes to learn your way around. . . Not just to learn your way around the streets and shops, but to learn your way around the customs of the place. Every time I’ve moved I’ve discovered different rules unique to that community. Our family loved spending four years in Oregon, but it was a big change from downtown Chicago. On Michigan Avenue I always felt like I had to dress up just to go the gym; in Oregon, dressing for dinner parties meant shorts and tee shirts. One of my criteria for moving to Lake Forest was whether I could get away with wearing sweats to the grocery store.

Wherever we go, there are customs to follow and protocols to observe. These rules serve a useful purpose: they make us feel comfortable; they give us confidence; they establish an order that helps us understand and relate to each other. It’s human nature to want to know what’s expected of us.

Our desire for form and protocol isn’t limited to our social relationships. It’s also true of our relationship with God. We want to know what the rules are for our faith. That need is clearly at work in our first lesson today, when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. They want to know the right way to approach God -- the appropriate words, the proper form. They knew the Scribes and Pharisees had very prescribed orders of prayer. Recently they discovered that Jesus’ cousin and fellow religious leader, John the Baptist, had taught his disciples to pray. Now Jesus’ disciples are seeking to learn the “right” way to relate to God: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Jesus honors their request, and teaches them the Lord’s Prayer. Not a huge departure from the norms of the time, the Lord’s Prayer is rather the epitome of Jewish prayers of Jesus’ day, a model that any rabbi would admire. So before we address Jesus’ teaching on prayer in general, I want to take some time with the Lord’s Prayer.

There are two very similar records of the Lord’s Prayer in the Bible – one in Luke and one in Matthew. Matthew’s is the version modern Christians use, with Protestants adding “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory

forever” ... a line not found in most ancient manuscripts but included in the 2nd c. worship document called “The Didache.” As for “debts,” “trespasses,” or the modern version, “sins” ... well, it’s that’s just a matter of English translation. Enough about history. What of the Lord’s Prayer itself, a prayer we can recite without thinking, and perhaps often do?

“Our Father”: notice from the start that prayer is relational. We come to God in relationship with him as a loving parent; and we come to God in relationship with all of our brothers and sisters as well. Jesus doesn’t teach us to say, “Me and mine” but “us and ours.” Every time we say the Lord’s Prayer we are saying it with all of God’s children throughout the earth; asking for these things not just for ourselves but for everyone else.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” We start with our intimate relationship with God ... but then we quickly acknowledge that we are not equal to God, but kneel in awe of God’s glory and honor.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Acknowledging God’s wisdom and sovereignty, our requests begin not with *our* wishes but for *God’s* will to be done. *Then* we confess our own needs. “Give us this day our daily bread.” God knows we are vulnerable and dependent on him. Notice that we are not praying for riches and abundance – this is not the “prosperity gospel” – but we are praying for *enough*, for God’s providence for today. And notice again that we are praying not only for ourselves, but for everyone who lacks bread this day. We hold them in our care as our brothers and sisters, children of our heavenly Father.

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” The word “debts” or “trespasses” is really the legal term it sounds like. Acknowledging our own need to forgive our debtors, we ask God to wipe away the debt we owe him – the tab we’ve run up, the credit we’ve borrowed. This debt includes our inattention towards God – the worship we’ve skipped, the Bible we’ve neglected to read, the spiritual gifts we’ve squandered, the offerings we’ve been stingy with. And this debt includes our sins against the world – the people we’ve hurt, the creation we’ve trashed, the seeds of misery we’ve sown for future generations to clean up after us. It is no small bill we’re asking God to forgive.

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”: It is not enough to ask God to wipe away our debt; we must also ask God to protect us from racking up new expenses. We acknowledge our weakness in the face of temptation, our propensity to fall into the same sins we have trafficked in before, and the constant threat of new evils masquerading as good.

“For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.” Jesus’ prayer closes with a word of confidence: we hope because God is in charge, and in the end, God’s gracious will and glorious vision will prevail. Whatever today’s trials might bring, God will triumph in the end.

This, Jesus tells his followers, is what to pray. But, so typically of Jesus, he reaches beyond their question. They asked to be taught what to pray. But Jesus knows they also need to know how to pray. Because there are all kinds of prayers in the Bible – thanksgiving for creation; lament at one’s darkest hour; confession of terrible sins; and no single prayer, even from Christ’s own lips, can capture all the prayers we need to and ought to lift up to the throne of grace. We all need to know *how* to pray.

So after Jesus teaches them the Lord’s Prayer, he goes on to tell this parable: It is midnight, and guests unexpectedly arrive at your door. Even as you get your robe and slippers you realize that you have nothing to feed them: a matter of staggering shame in the Middle East even today. It would be horrifyingly rude not to offer a generous meal. What do you do? In the days before 24-hour groceries, you do the only thing you can. You rouse your neighbor in the dead of night, begging for a loaf of bread.

Now it’s not because your neighbor is a generous person, or because of your charming friendship that he rouses: It is because of the sheer shamelessness you display when you come knocking at his door. It is your very impropriety that impresses him. If you’re that desperate, the neighbor reasons, then there’s nothing left for him to do but to get up and stumble in his kitchen to find a loaf of bread to share. And if a grumpy neighbor will do that much, how much more will God respond with generosity when you come knocking on heaven’s door?

In case we miss the point, Jesus brings it home in the final verses of our passage. Ask, he says. Seek. Knock. Don't hesitate to pray. Don't hide your heart's concerns. Why? Not because we're particularly worthy, but because God is trustworthy. God is like a good father, a better parent than any of us. And God knows what is good for us, often better than we know ourselves.

And then, in case we miss the point again, Jesus teaches us again in chapter 18: he encourages us to pray and not to lose heart. Like the widow appealing to the judge, we should appeal tenaciously to God. And if an unrighteous judge honors such petitions, how much more will God welcome our prayers, beyond what we could imagine.

When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, they are asking for a protocol for prayer. They want to know what to pray. Jesus gives them what they want, but more importantly, he gives them what they need. They want to know what to pray, but he teaches them how to pray too, which is this: don't be shy about pounding on God's door. Forget the form. Forget the protocol. Don't worry about what to pray. Just pray. Urgently, sincerely, unabashedly.

I suspect that in our hearts, most of us don't need to be taught that. In spite of our proper upbringing, our orderly Presbyterian ways, our reticence to appear too bold, in spite of all this, in our hearts we already know what it means to pound on God's door at midnight.

A friend of mine, Jon Walton, is pastor of First Church in New York City. He was my mentor in the first church that I served as an intern on Long Island. When Jon was still in his forties, he had already buried both of his parents, gone through two open-heart surgeries, and nursed a close friend through a long illness and painful death. Then he moved to lower Manhattan in August, 2001 ... two weeks before the World Trade Center fell. If anyone knows what it means to pound on God's door in the middle of the night, Jon does. Jon also knows that he is not alone in his urgent need of prayer. He says:

“We have most of us been there asking for bread at midnight at some time in our lives, if not for ourselves, for those we love. We pray with all our heart for our children when they travel, ... that they will be safe on their

way, that they will indeed have Godspeed. We pray on the night before surgery that the lump in the breast is not cancer ... or at least that it hasn't spread anywhere else. We pray to get ahead at work, that someone will recognize how valuable we really are, or talented, or necessary. We pray for bread at midnight ... pleading our case in the hopes that God is listening" (citation lost).

We have most of us been there, pounding on God's door at midnight. It is what we naturally do when we are most in need. "O God," we murmur. "Heaven help us." Our sighs and whispers betray our urgency. When we are at our wit's end, afraid or in trouble, or simply at a loss for what to say or do, we pray. We go to God at midnight because it is the only place open.

This is Jesus' model of prayer: a desperate neighbor pounding on the door, or a frantic widow hounding a judge. Jesus doesn't tell us to turn to God only in crisis. But he tells us God will be there when we do.

I can't tell you how many people have asked me, in the privacy of the hospital or my office or their living room, whether it's OK to pray for what they desperately want. The family, torn up over their son's massive injuries, wanting to know whether they should pray for a miraculous healing. The young woman, finally courageous enough to leave a suffocating relationship, wondering if it's OK to pray for reconciliation. The middle-aged daughter, struggling to care for her 90-year-old mother whose disease has rendered her incoherent and abusive, wondering if it's all right to pray for swift and painless death. Is it all right, really all right, to pray for the secret, unspeakable desires of our hearts?

Jesus' answer is an uncompromised "yes." "Ask," he tells us. "Seek. Knock. And whoever asks will be answered, and whoever seeks will find, and whoever knocks" -- even in the middle of the night -- "will have the door opened."

We are old and wise enough to know that God's answer may not be the one we want. Jesus doesn't promise that God will grant our every wish. We have all prayed for things we never got. We have all knocked at midnight and gone away empty. We pray. Sometimes we receive our request and sometimes we do not.

The family prayed for healing for their son, but he never recovered. The young woman prayed for reconciliation, but her boyfriend did not return. The middle-aged daughter prayed for her mother's peaceful death, and it did come, with merciful speed.

It is risky to pray, because we may be disappointed. There are no guarantees. Our faith does not reduce God to a sacred Santa Claus or divine vending machine. Nor do we believe that we can win God's approval by praying harder or behaving holier. Prayers that are not "successful" do not mean that we are failures at prayer, nor that God rejects us. Prayer risks that God's answer may be a gentle "no," or "not yet," or "I have something else in mind for you." Whatever else God's response may be, it will always include this promise: "whatever happens, I will be with you."

Over twenty years ago, my grandmother taught me how to pray this way. I have told some of you this story; it had a great impact on me. My family was gathered for my sister's wedding, and suddenly, not long after the ceremony, my father fell ill and was hospitalized. There, in a freak reaction to the iodine in the testing dye, Dad went into respiratory failure and for two days hovered between life and death. My Armenian grandmother, his mother, an anxious but deeply pious person, was beside herself with worry. She felt helpless to save her favorite son. It was my job to keep her calm and, frankly, to keep her out of the way. So I appealed to her faith, and we kept busy praying.

Grandma asked me to pray first, so in my best seminary training, I offered polite, theologically correct prayers for what looked like a hopeless situation. I asked for God's sovereign will to be done, that if Dad were to die that he be received into God's everlasting arms, that we find patience and endurance, yadda, yadda, yadda. Grandma would have none of it. She prayed for God's will, of course, and meant it. But then she gave God a piece of her mind. She could have been Abraham, bargaining with God! She told God to save her son because he was such a good boy. . . to save him because she had been a faithful Christian and a good mother. . . to save him because she needed him so much. . . and, my favorite, to save him because God was, after all, a merciful and loving God, and needed to live up to his reputation. She pleaded, begged and cried. She was shameless. And she was absolutely certain that God heard her.

My father survived his brush with death, and lived to take care of my mother all those years when she needed him. He's here with us today. I can't know whether my grandmother's prayers helped him; I think they did. I do know they helped her, and they certainly changed me. I can't be sure, but I suspect that, although my grandmother was overwhelmed with gratitude for my Dad's recovery, her faith ultimately would not have been shaken had her son died. She prayed because she needed to. She shook God's door down, because it was a familiar and trustworthy place to go. She told God exactly what was on her heart because it was her right and privilege and responsibility as a Christian to pray. She put herself and her son in God's hands, utterly confident in God's providence and mercy.

And that's exactly how Jesus teaches us to pray. It's not a matter of protocol -- it's a matter of need. It's not a matter of form -- it's a matter of honesty. It's not a matter of eloquence -- it's a matter of faith, that however the words come tumbling out, God is listening.

So pray. Pray always and do not lose heart. Ask what's weighing heavy on your soul. Seek what you most deeply desire. Knock and keep knocking on heaven's door. Whatever our needs, no matter how small or great, how painful or noble, we place them in God's hands. We may not receive what our hearts desire. We may not hear the answer that we want. But Jesus promises this: When we come pounding on that door in the middle of the night, our God will get up and answer. Amen.