

"Ask, Search, Knock"

Proper 12C, 25 July 25, 2010

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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 anything 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!"

Prayer.

Prayer is a teachable skill.

At a young age

Parents, Sunday school teachers, and pastors alike

Teach our children

Prayers for bedtime,

Prayers before a meal,

Prayers at the communion rail.

Guidelines and expectations are set:

Don't let your thoughts stray;

The posture for prayer,

Often, hands folded and head bowed;

Even how to pray in public,

Usually, keep it short and simple!

Mechanics are taught by rote memorization

And burned deeply into our memories

For recall at a moments notice.

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The goal is to create idealism,
 A placid countenance,
 A reverence regarding prayer
 That becomes acculturated into life-long Christian practice.

We age,
 We mature,
 We ripen into adulthood,
 And the silver polish of prayer begins to develop a tarnish.
 Life experiences create questions beyond mere mechanics:
 How does God answer prayers?
 Why aren't my prayers always answered?
 Tragedy, illness, suffering, death
 Can create a tremendous amount of
 Christian frustration,
 disappointment,
 misunderstanding,
 and pain.
 I asked, Lord.
 I begged you, Lord.
 Yet, you didn't appear to hear my cry.
 You told me to pray like this;
 I prayed like that,
 And nothing seemed to happen.
 Indeed,
 There may come patches in life
 Where we stop praying all together.
 Yes, we bow,
 We may even recite,
 But we allow our minds to be elsewhere ...
 Simply because we've become
 chronically underwhelmed with the results.
 Late life brushes with mortality,
 Taking inventory of one's ultimate concern,
 I've observed,
 Often creates a renewed passion
 To re-engage in an active prayer life.

No place in the Gospel narratives
 Is a better place to begin
 A deeper reflection about prayer
 Than this eleventh chapter of St. Luke.
 In thirteen short verses we are given

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The Lord's prayer,
 A parable on prayer, and
 Several sayings on prayer.
 Answers to our deeper questions
 Can be squeezed from scripture.
 The words of Jesus
 Give us direction
 And set the larger context
 In which conclusions about prayer can be made.

I don't know why we've come to call
 Jesus' response to the disciples question
 "The Lord's Prayer."

Given the disciples exposure to our Lord's practice,
 (Luke gives at least nine accounts of Jesus praying)
 it might more appropriately be called
 "The Disciples' Prayer"

[With thanks to David Lose, Marbury E. Anderson Biblical Preaching Chair, Luther
 Seminary, St. Paul, MN, as found at workingpreacher.org]

More plain,
 more simple
 than Matthew's version,
 Luke offers a more down to earth signature
 That emphasizes bread for tomorrow,
 The importance of forgiveness,
 And an intimate invitation to address the Holy One of Israel,
 Whose name no Jew would ever speak or write,
 To address God as pater,
 Father;
 As a child would ask a loving parent
 Something of need or desire.
 Pray intimately.

"Suppose one of you has a friend,"
 Jesus begins his parable with a premise
 That almost sounds like an attempt at Scottish humor.
 "Go away!" is the first response to the knock.
 "I've got company, and nothing to serve, can you help me?"
 "We're already in bed; go away!"
 Persistent knocking, however,
 Persistent pleading
 brings results.
 "Alright, already! Let me see what I can find you.

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Just stop the knocking; you'll wake the entire neighborhood!"
 I'm told by Greek scholars
 That the word Persistence,
 Anaideia,
 Is better translated as
 "shamelessness."
 It implies a boldness that comes from familiarity
 And the knowledge that the neighbor is beholden
 By the community's expectation of hospitality.
 The friendly neighbor is probably thinking to himself,
 "you know I can't turn you away!
 Let me see what I can find you."
 I like this boldness,
 This parables' posture taken towards prayer.
 Pray shamelessly.

In a similar way,
 Ask, search, knock
 Is often thought of as a directive to be persistent.
 However, it appears that when these commands are coupled
 With Jesus' hyperbolic, rhetorical questions
 ... Who would give your child a snake when they asked for a fish? ...
 ... Who would give your child a scorpion when they ask for an egg? ...
 one can advance these sayings beyond the obvious:
 Ask, search, knock may be more about confidence
 ... knowing that you will receive what you ask for ...
 and more about trust
 ... trusting that God will respond to your every petition ...
 than it is about persistence.
 Yes, persistent prayer is the obvious reach that Jesus is making.
 Yet, confidence and trust are the foundation that lay just below the surface
 For those willing to do some exploration.
 Pray with confidence.
 Pray, trusting that God will respond.

So, where does this leave us?
 Like the original disciples
 We love the questions about mechanics:
 How?
 Why?
 When should we pray?
 Given the complexity of life
 And our innate desire for instant solutions

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.... Point zero nine seconds for a Google search, finding 14 billion results ...
 40 minutes to resolve the toughest case on CSI or Law and Order ...
 it is entirely understandable
 why most of us never move beyond
 the mechanical question about prayer.

Yet, for those who are spiritually evolving and curious
 It is important to recognize that
 Jesus is more interested in invitation than explanation.

Prayer becomes the means
 To invite us into a relationship with God,
 "offering us the opportunity to approach
 the God whose name is too holy to speak
 and whose countenance too terrible to behold
 with the familiarity, boldness, and trust of a young child
 running to her parent
 for both provision and protection."

[Quotation by David Lose, Marbury E. Anderson Biblical Preaching Chair, Luther
 Seminary, St. Paul, MN, as found at workingpreacher.org]

Indeed, prayer is less about getting
 Than it is about
 being in relationship with God.
 Though God may know all our needs before we ask,
 Today we are invited to ask anyways.
 Ask because we are invited into the conversation with our Creator,
 We are invited into an intimate relationship with our God.
 We are invited to ask
 With the confidence that
 Regardless of the outcome
 Our relationship with God
 Can bear the strain,
 Will survive the immediate need,
 And finally, will continue to deepen and grow.
 Perhaps our relationship with God
 May even depend upon God hearing our every need.

Pray intimately.
 Pray shamelessly.
 Pray with confidence, knowing that God will respond.
 And you will draw close to God.
 Amen.

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