

Gift and Discipline
Preached by
Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even
United Church of Fayetteville
July 23, 2023

For Reflection: *"Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays."* Soren Kierkegaard

Hebrew Scripture: *2 Chronicles 6: 18-21*

But will God indeed reside with mortals on earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you. May your eyes be open day and night toward this house, the place where you promised to set your name, and may you heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. And hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; may you hear from heaven your dwelling place; hear and forgive.

Gospel Reading: *Luke 11: 1-13*

Jesus 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!"

Today's passage from Luke is a set of collected lectures by Jesus on prayer: a model prayer and two stories to help us understand our relationship to God in prayer. It's likely that Jesus uttered these teachings over a period of time in response to different questions. That they are helpful teachings is reflected in the fact they are very familiar to us. They have been repeated, memorized, quoted and passed on by thousands of faithful people.

They are so familiar; it is easy to jump into the meat without looking at the framework Luke provided. The passage begins, "He was praying in a certain place..." Jesus's prayer life was critically important to him, his disciples and to Luke's understanding of who Jesus was. All the gospels, especially Luke's record, that Jesus prayed at all the important junctures of his life and ministry: during the temptation in the wilderness, at his baptism, before he chose the 12 disciples, and before he first spoke of his death in Jerusalem. Later he would pray in the garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal and from the cross itself. He prays along the way; he doesn't wait to be driven to his knees.

Jesus' disciples look at him with awe and not a little envy: envy of his focus and clarity of purpose, his centeredness and relationship with God, his spirituality. They respond: "Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray..."

"Lord, teach us to pray." How many times have we uttered that request? We look with envy at someone whose faith serves as the anchor and wings of their life and we say to ourselves: "I need to develop my spirituality," or "I want a closer relationship with God." We know that at the center of those wants and needs is prayer. We get confused about the formula and everyone has a different answer for how to go about it, or a different experience of how beneficial it is.

There is varied advice about what and when to pray, concern about the proper words or appropriate requests and the lingering question: "What good does prayer do?" Yet still we say, "Lord, teach us to pray."

How does Jesus respond? First Jesus offered a model—we call it the Lord's Prayer. Entire sermons can and have been preached on each phrase of the prayer. Rather than focus on such specifics today, let's consider a few broader characteristics:

The prayer begins "Father" acknowledging our intimate, familial relationship with the One to whom we speak, the One who made us and the One who call us children. Jesus reminds us that when we pray, first remember we are speaking to One who loves us. Today, let's avoid getting sidetracked by the gender of the parent, or the limits of human parents and remember we are cherished by a God whose love exceeds all possibilities of human love.

After orienting us in our relationship with God who loves us, the prayer is a series of petitions. They run the gamut from hoping for God's final victory in the world, to meeting basic human needs, seeking God's forgiveness, and asking to be spared difficult times and choices. We could discuss endlessly how broadly or narrowly those petitions might be interpreted and what might be included in an appropriate prayer. The problem is we would have to first discuss which version of the prayer we're talking about—the one I read this morning, which you noticed is different than the one we say weekly. That one is more like, but not exactly like Matthew's version. Mark's has only the request for forgiveness. John doesn't mention it at all.

We can and do get sidetracked by focusing on the words we use. We wonder whether we are praying a good prayer or whether we are asking for too much. Not knowing the answers, we don't pray at all. Yet when we look at examples of the prayers in Scripture, we see no such inhibitions. We are pressed to find something they don't pray for. People pray for children and health. They pray for neighbors. They pray their offerings will be acceptable and their temples will be a place where the Lord can be found. Like Solomon, they ask to be heard. They pray for food, water and faith. They pray for the nation and the king's marriage, for defeat of enemies and the success of their armies. They pray for crops, rain and guidance.

The ways they pray and the emotions they express are also notable: the powerful poetry of the psalms and the stumbling sentences of the one who says, "I believe. Help my unbelief." They whine, cry and rage at the Lord. They demand explanations, shout, give thanks and laugh with delight. Some prayers, are as St. Paul writes, "sighs without words." The only consistency throughout Scripture is that the people prayed and God responded: sometimes with "yes," sometimes with anger at human arrogance and sometimes with grief when the answer was "no." God always responded. Scripture teaches us that it is not so much what or how we pray, but that we pray which is critical.

"Teach us how to pray, Lord." The teaching comes in many forms, the words of the Lord's prayer, the example of our ancestors in faith, in the words of the familiar hymn, "What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer."

"Teach us how to pray, Lord." Carry everything to God in prayer.

If that's all there was to it, we might be better at praying. Yet, when we're in a relationship with someone, asking for things that we need, want or dream of, we look for a response. Our worst fear is that God won't answer. C.S. Lewis said, "We can bear to be refused, not ignored." Fear can paralyze us into not praying at all.

The experience of people of faith has not been that God ignored them, but that they had difficulty discerning God's response. Sarah waited 80 years for a child. Job prayed many times before he received God's response to his suffering. Jesus' disciples said to him, "We've been praying. We have been taking everything to God in prayer, but we're not getting an answer. What are we doing wrong?"

Jesus responds with a story of someone who knocks on a friend's door at midnight asking for bread, and is given the bread, not out of friendship or charity, but simply so he can go back to sleep. It's easy to misinterpret Jesus' story into suggesting that God responds best to nags; that God is some kind of cosmic slot machine. Eventually we will put enough tokens in to the slot, the odds will tip in our favor and we'll hit the jackpot of answered prayers.

If that were the case, there would not be an unanswered prayer left. Frederick Buechner says, "that God has not gotten a moment's rest since he gave his name to Moses. Humankind has not stopped using it ever since." With this story, Jesus says, "Keep talking. Keep praying. Stay in the relationship. God will respond, not because we've beaten down God's resistance. God responds because God is far more faithful to our relationship and loves us more than any flawed human friend possibly can. " God responds for our good and not so God can get some rest.

Some of Jesus' disciples couldn't get a response. Others were getting answers they didn't want to hear. It seemed God was saying "no" or "take the harder way" or "You made me a promise. I want you to keep it." They too wanted to know what they were doing wrong.

Jesus answered, "Ask, and it will be given you; for everyone who asks receives" and again

tells a story this time of parents who give their children not bad things but good things when they ask.

Frustrating, disheartening words for those disciples and for us, especially if we think they say that when a child asks for an egg they get an egg. For every answered prayer, every one of us can tell a story of unanswered prayer; prayers we prayed for ourselves or ones we love. We asked for life instead of death, for babies, for love instead of divorce or loneliness, for hope instead of despair, for faith instead of doubt, for peace instead of pain. We can tell of unfound treasure and unopened doors, no matter how hard or long we have prayed, that we asked and the answer was no. Even Jesus prayed a prayer whose answer was "no," when he prayed "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."

We wonder whether prayer is not just hard. In a culture driven to see results, we wonder whether it is futile. We are afraid to say it aloud, but sometimes we even wonder whether Jesus was wrong and answered prayers are the result of coincidence, and not God's work. Before our doubt takes us that far, let's listen again to more of Jesus' teaching: "If you 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!"

"How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Jesus doesn't say prayer is a guarantee of getting what we ask for. In fact, the thrust of his teaching and the evidence of his own prayers and life is that prayer is a precarious practice: that there will be an uncertain response to our petitions. In fact, the words "precarious" and "prayer" are so closely related they come from the same root word meaning uncertain petition.

Eugene Petersen says, "When we pray, we have a more than average chance of ending up in a place we never hoped to be." We pray for a job or a family and instead we find ourselves at peace with what we don't have. We rage and grieve our losses and try to cut ourselves off from the world and instead find ourselves deeply bound to the community and God who loved us when we could not love ourselves.

Jesus does not promise us the things we pray for. He says that God's response to unceasing prayer is the gift of the Holy Spirit which gives us strength to endure, courage to keep on seeking. Jesus holds up for us the image of God as one who loves us beyond all reason, who loves us beyond our experience, who loves us beyond any human capacity to love. Jesus promises that prayer will keep us in relationship with the One who loves us this much.

"Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus urges us to carry everything to God in prayer—to pray, not fearfully, dreading disappointment, but to pray with reckless abandon, throwing all our lives and concerns onto God's ears, because it is also possible that our prayers will be answered if we are not too timid to make them. We pray for a job and find a vocation, pray for a child and have one, pray to survive surgery and live to dance at our grandchild's wedding, pray for peace in disappointment and find love beyond measure. To paraphrase Petersen, "When we pray, we have a more than average chance of ending up in a place we never dared hope to be." Miracles do happen and prayers are answered.

Prayer is indeed the precarious practice; full of uncertainty in the asking and the answering. The gift and discipline of prayer will result in the gift of the Holy Spirit. It can result in the spirituality we envy and the wholeness we crave. To engage in prayer is to enter into the most risky of relationships with our Father. Anything is possible when we pray to the One who loves us with a love that will not let us go.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Most holy and compassionate God: Each day and each week, we are changed by the lives we live. We bear the marks of our hurts and joys, rejoicing and grieving, illness and health, successes and failures, disappointments and satisfactions. Things we never dared hope for and things we dread in the night, they happen so quickly. We look in the mirror and find ourselves marked and scarred by events out of our control.

As we gather together in prayer, let us remember that you have marked us as yours, and through your Spirit we have the power to change the lives we live. We may not be able to control events, but with your help we can choose how we respond to them. Each day, whether the events of the day bring us joy or sorrow or both, help us to know that you are with us, caring for us, holding us, calling us to new life in Christ. Remind us that your will for us is wholeness, not brokenness. Give us the strength and endurance to move toward you and to give thanks for your care in all things.

All this we ask as members of the body of your Son, as we pray together the prayer your Son taught us...

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day, our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**