

“Prayer”
 July 24, 2016
 Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
 Luke 11:1-13

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

Introduction

Today we continue our journey through the Gospel of Luke. And our Scripture passage takes us to a place of a particular spiritual practice.

It's another day in the life of Jesus, and he is doing what comes natural to him; he is praying. His closest followers, his disciples, want to know how to pray like him. Not only do they want to follow him, but being the spiritual apprentices they are, they want to *be* like him. One of them says,

"Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

This is a common scenario at the time. John the Baptist taught his disciples how to pray. This is what a good rabbi does; teaches his students how to do spiritual disciplines; and in this case how to pray to God; how to communicate with the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

Jesus obliges. He teaches; he leads them and gives them instructions. And today's lesson is about what it means to simply ask things of a God who is longing for relationship with human beings.

The Lord's Prayer

The story begins in the Lord's Prayer. What our Catholic sisters and brothers call the "Our Father." It's a familiar prayer. A prayer we have known most of our lives, and said countless times. It is a brief and simple prayer:

Jesus says to the disciples, "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."

Jesus leaves it at that. That is all we get in Luke's version. Matthew's gospel adds, *"But deliver us from the evil one."* Some more ancient manuscripts of the Gospels include then, after that, *"For thine is the kingdom, and the glory, and the power forever."* But even with those additions, the prayer is *still* rather brief and yet it covers a lot in a short time. And to just give a very brief overview of the prayer: we begin by saying "Father." This establishes relationship immediately with the Creator and with each other. We all have our earthly fathers, but we all share one heavenly Father, the Father of all fathers. And beyond male specific pronouns we could say the Parent of all parents, Provider of all providers; that which is above all and beyond humanity's ability to adequately name.

But still, we next say, *"Hallowed be thy name."* or *"Holy is your name."* It is the name above all names, and we are approaching holiness when the name is on our lips or even thought of in our mind.

Next we say, *"Your kingdom come."* Again in Matthew there is slight expansion to this thought which says, *"On earth as it is in heaven."* But Luke keeps it brief: *"Your kingdom come."* This is a profound request. Three words that summarize most of what Jesus preached in his earthly ministry: the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God has

broken into the kingdom of this world but is not yet completely here, and Jesus instructs us to pray for it to continue to come.

Next we say “Give us each day our daily bread.” We ask for our physical sustenance. But knowing that we do not live on bread alone we are asking for our spiritual sustenance as well. The very bread of life. That which comes to us through reading scripture, through Holy Communion, through prayer and worship, anything that brings us into communion with God.

Next we ask God to forgive us our sins, our trespasses, our debts. Now we are getting down to it. Now we are on the subject of our salvation. Now we are at the place where what we ask for can only be satisfied through faith in the one God sent; the one who teaches us this prayer. We ask because we cannot do it on our own. *“Forgive us our sins.”* This is the big ask. But we *must* ask because next we say, “for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” Or in the wording of our tradition, *“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* There is an inseparable construct here where one part functions because of the other. This central part of the prayer is a clear reminder of the connection and love between us and God and us and each other.

Then to finish the prayer we say, *“Do not bring us to the time of trial.”* Or, again as we say in our tradition, *“Lead us not into temptation.”* As we journey through life, we are asking for God’s protection.

And so we pray this prayer. The Lord’s Prayer. And why? Because God is longing for us to connect, to enter into relationship. So, Jesus teaches us how to express our needs to God through this prayer.

A Mini Parable

And as you know, this is not a one-time prayer. This is our weekly prayer. This is our daily prayer. This can even be our hourly prayer. “Pray without ceasing,” Paul said. We must keep at it. This is a spiritual discipline. A discipline is something we do on a regular, consistent basis. It’s a good habit we cultivate and incorporate into our lives to produce good results. Persistent prayer becomes a necessity.

Jesus tells a mini parable, a short story to help illustrate the dynamics and mechanics of prayer.

He tells it like this, *“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.*

The Secret

There is a secret to effective prayer. And it comes as a promise. A promise from Jesus himself.

“So I say to you,” Jesus says, “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.”

God wants to give us good gifts. It seems that all we need to do is ask.

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?

Vivid analogies to show how God responds to those who ask.

*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!”*

Catch this. Yes, the Lord teaches how to prayer through the Lord’s prayer, but here he adds an additional request that should be on our minds and on our lips when we come to God in prayer. The Holy Spirit; the third person in the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And Jesus tells us that we are to ask for the Holy Spirit. We must ask. Especially now. In a troubled world where yet again this week violence has broken out, where divisions among people in our own country have widened, and healing is needed more than ever, as people of the Church—those who are called to be salt and light—we must be a people of prayer. If we are to be reconciled one to another, we must be a people of prayer. If there is to be renewal in the Church, if there is to be a spiritual revival, if there is to healing of illness, and deliverance from addiction, we must be a unified people of prayer. But hear the Good News! God is longing to give us good gifts, and God is asking us to simply ask. This is the key. We must be a people of prayer.

Sending Out in Mission

Ask, search, and knock. Today’s teaching is to develop the discipline of prayer. It’s an encouragement to each individual to engage God daily in prayer, and for us in ministry here at Island Heights United Methodist Church to call upon the Holy Spirit in everything we do. In every service, at every meeting, whenever we do ministry, and whenever we pray for each other. This is how our connection and relationship with the Creator and Sustainer of the universe is established and maintained.

Ask, search, and knock. Ask for the Holy Spirit. “Come, Holy Spirit, we say come!” Jesus teaches that God gives the Holy Spirit to us when we ask.

Search for the answers in prayer to all that vexes and troubles you. Jesus promises that in prayer you will find the answers.

Knock until the door is opened. Jesus reminds us to be consistent and persistent in our prayers until we get what we came for.

Ask, search, and knock. Amen.

At this time please take a few moments in silent prayer and reflection, and then recommit yourselves to the discipline of prayer.