

Ask, Search, Knock
Luke's Lord's Prayer / Luke 11:1-13
Ordinary 17c
7/24/2022
First Presbyterian, Champaign / Windsor of Savoy

One of my regular duties leading worship here is leading the pastoral prayer and Lord's prayer. One Sunday, not very long ago, I lost my place when leading the prayer, we all know by heart. When I got to my seat, Matt asked me what happened during the prayer. I got lost. My mind wandered. I blew it. Thank goodness for you all, and especially for the dulcet tones of Bruce Rainey who kept the congregation all going until I could find my place.

The words we say over and over again can become nearly meaningless if we don't listen to ourselves. And yet...

Saying them over and over can write these words on our hearts. They can become part of us. Part of the deep, hard-wiring of our minds so these words can come spilling out even when we don't know what we are saying.

Many years ago, I made a hospital visit to see a parishioner who was so ill she had become uncommunicative. She would not wake up, but was active in her bed. As a young woman who had not much experience visiting the very ill, I was just unsure of what to do. I wanted her to know I was there and talked to her, but nothing was coming back my way. So I started praying extemporaneously to her. Then running out of ideas, I decided to pray the Lord's Prayer as a way of wrapping up my now extremely brief visit. I was stunned when her lips started moving along with mine. She was in there, but I just could not reach her with my own words. The familiar words of scripture and our tradition found that part that was still very much present deep within her. I then flipped to the 23rd psalm and had the same response. These prayers can become part of us, way down deep.

I realized then that I could not take the Lord's Prayer for granted. It has a power that can get lost in its frequent use. The power of this prayer is just one reason we include it in nearly every worship service we have. (Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, so it is a really good place for us to start.)

The disciples in today's passage ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, like John taught his disciples. So we get to the prayer he taught. But this is really short. There are basically and address to God and 5 requests. That's it.

Jesus is known for his praying, the gospel of Luke.

Frederick Buechner wrote:

Luke is the one who goes out of his way to make it clear how big Jesus was on praying. He prayed when he was baptized and after he healed the leper and the night before he called the twelve disciples, and Luke was the only one to mention these together with a few others like them. He was also the only one to say that the last words Jesus ever spoke were the prayer, "Father, into thy hand I commend my spirit." It's also thanks to Luke that there's a record of the jokes Jesus told about the man who kept knocking at his friend's door till he finally got out of bed to open it and the widow who kept bugging the crooked judge till he finally heard her case just to get a little peace, the point of both of which seems to be that if you don't think God has heard you the first time, don't give up till you're hoarse. Luke wanted that to be remembered too.¹

No wonder his disciples want Jesus to teach them how to pray. He prays, a LOT. Their beloved leader has such a deep connection with God, and they want some of that for themselves.

If you have ever wanted to be good at something, the advice that often comes is to practice. My mother was a gifted musician, having earned a full scholarship in piano performance to Northwestern. As I was growing up she had piano pupils come to our house for lessons. I knew how every lesson would begin...scales up and down the piano, with progressions to the next key. Even her most accomplished students started every lesson with scales.

Author Elizabeth Lesser said, and I am changing it slightly:

“Meditation practice is like piano scales, basketball drills, ballroom dance class. Practice requires discipline; it can be tedious; it is necessary. After you have practiced enough, you become more skilled at the art form itself. You do not practice to become a great scale player or drill champion. You practice to become a musician or athlete. Likewise, one does not practice ~~meditation~~ **prayer** to become a great ~~meditation~~ **pray-er**. We ~~meditation~~ **pray** to wake up and live, to become skilled at the art of living.”²

¹ Buechner *Peculiar Treasures* and later in *Beyond Words*

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/170158-meditation-practice-is-like-piano-scales-basketball-drills-ballroom-dance> — Elizabeth Lesser, *The Seeker's Guide: Making Your Life a Spiritual Adventure*

But when it comes to prayer it can feel strange to practice something that we don't really understand. It could be something like practicing breathing. Breathing is so much a part of us that it actually sounds kind of strange to practice breathing. Women in childbirth classes are taught breathing techniques to lessen the pain. When I started practicing yoga, I learned that yoga was a combination of movement, breathing, and yogi in one meaning is a seat for prayer. I was intrigued to learn techniques to breathe. My yogi calls it breath work. Breathing and moving and how the body is all tied together. There is a local cardiology study that uses breathing techniques to reduce stress to keep the heart healthy. If we have to practice breathing, it is no wonder we need to practice praying as well. Because sometimes prayer feels very un-natural.

Jesus taught his disciples a brief prayer that would help them know just what to say. In fact, these few words are kind of the crux of what it means to be a person of faith. We are used to it now, but the opening word may have startled his disciples a bit. Calling God "Father" set this prayer apart. This prayer is relational and communal in manner. Speaking to God as if God is our parent means this relationship is a close and personal one. And yet, this relationship is also set apart as holy. "Hallowed be your name." The only other time I regularly hear the word hallowed is about these hallowed halls. Hallowed means to not only be holy and set apart, but the connotation is that this Father, this Abba, is has goodness at God's essence.

Know that God is good.

Know that God is good.

Know that God is good,

God is good, God is good.

God is so good. God is so good.

God is so good,

God's so good to me.

After declaring God's goodness we have a few more phrases to include in our prayer:

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.

Short and sweet. Easy to remember, but loaded with meaning.

Several places in scripture we hear Jesus telling his disciples not to heap on empty words in our prayers. Prayer does not have to be long, it just has to connect us to God and focus us on what is important.

This version of the Lord's Prayer starts with the proper focus on God and asking for God's reign to come, and soon.

Then asking for what we need...this version says Each Day, our daily bread. Basic sustenance, not meat, nor riches. The other thing notable is that it is about the bread each day, harkening back to the Israelites dependence on God for the manna in the wilderness.

Forgiveness of our sins is mentioned, which seems to be a natural springing forth of the fact that we ourselves forgive EVERYONE indebted to us. When we pause to think about this sentence, it may make us wriggle uncomfortably, since we know full well we have some work to do on forgiving everyone indebted to us. That slight from last week, yeah we remember it. You forgot your wallet yet again and we need to buy dinner...yeah we still think about it. Could this statement be a prayer for God's economics? Or perhaps it is the large favors we gave that still rankle us since no acknowledgement of the sacrifice is forthcoming. Maybe we are not as good at forgiving as we claim. And yet, we count on God forgiving us nonetheless, because we ask, and after all, God is good.

The prayer Jesus teaches his disciples wraps up with the simple request to "Don't bring us to time of trial." A fear of judgment, a fear of failure, a fear of getting what we *might actually deserve* by not living up to what our God expects of us? Yeah, that does not sound one bit fun; we would prefer to skip all of that, thank you very much.

Jesus' prayer concludes, but the passage includes a parable next about the friend and neighbor who comes banging on the door in the middle of the night, so he can feed his unexpected guests. This parable is tied up with the biblical notion of hospitality. If the neighbor has guests arrive no matter the time, it would be shameful to not offer them anything to eat before they laid down for the night. With the heat wave we have been having, I can only imagine heading out on a journey leaving as the day was at its hottest but traveling as it was getting cooler as the temperatures were dropping. So arriving well into the evening, hungry and tired and needing a place to lay one's head. Since hotels and lodgings for rent were scarcely available in the ancient world, travelers would find a distant relative

with which to spend the night. This is the sort of situation our unexpected host finds themselves. To not have anything to offer a guest is shameful, even if our friend and host is not only not a wealthy man, but a man who is barely making ends meet.

So our neighbor does a shameless act of heading across the way, in the middle of the night, and asks for something to give the unexpected guest. It's pretty gutsy to wake up a household just to ask for some bread. The example in our passage mentions that God will respond in a much better fashion, and NOT just because we won't stop knocking on the door. Our dear Abba will respond with the things we need.

That's the funny thing about prayer. We ask for what we want; we ask for what we think we need, and sometimes the answer to our prayers is something different than we expect or think or want. We ask from our vantage point, but cannot see the big picture, and certainly do not know the future or other conditions at play.

Prayer concerns we lift up so often deal with those we know intimately. Be it health or work or relationships, we pray for our loved ones, quite naturally. We want our loved ones to be well, be whole, be happy.

Story of Monica's prayers as written by Rev. John Claypool in his sermon on Day 1 radio.

There's a wonderful part of St. Augustine's Confession where he talks about how his mother, Monica, a profound Christian, had so wanted to bless him with a Christian vision; but as a young man, he had followed the example of his [profligate] decadent father. Augustine was living a life of great sensuality. He seemed to have no interest whatsoever in the things that were dear to his mother's heart. He was a very gifted, young scholar. He was raised in North Africa, and he realized that Italy held artistic promises that North Africa did not possess, and so he resolved to go to Italy that he might study more fully his chosen discipline of rhetoric. Monica, his mother, felt if he ever left her side, he would never come to a Christian conversion. And so one night she was praying earnestly in a chapel on the coast of North Africa that Augustine not leave her when, in fact, he was boarding a ship and setting across the Mediterranean to Italy. He went to Milan, which was the cultural capital at that time of Italy; and once he got there he was told that if he wanted to hear rhetoric in its finest form, he ought to go

down to the cathedral every Sunday because Bishop Ambrose was recognized as the greatest practitioner of rhetoric in all of Italy at that time. The person said you don't have to listen to what he says, but how he says it is absolutely masterful. Well, as it turned out, the young pagan began to do that, and lo and behold, through Ambrose's rhetoric, the wonder of the Gospel began to break in on the consciousness of young Augustine. It was through his human weakness that God eventually brought Augustine to a profound conversion, which led to his becoming one of the great shapers of our Western Christian position. The interesting thing is that Monica had no idea that of all the people in the world Ambrose was better equipped to bear witness to her son than she herself. And years later as Augustine looked back on that experience, he said of that night when she was praying so earnestly that he not leave her side, God denied her the form of her request that God might eventually give her the substance of it.

The whole point of this story is to invite us to trust, to believe that at the bottom of the river of reality there is nothing but unambiguous goodness. God is light and in God is no darkness at all and, therefore, when we pray, we make our requests known unto a wisdom and goodness greater than our own and then trust that the way God will respond is not like the indifference of that neighbor next door; but the response will come from the heart of a heavenly parent who loves us better than we love ourselves and knows in the profoundness sense what is best for us.³

As many of us are in this room are the reasons for which we pray, and they can change on a given day.

We might be trying to change God's mind; we might be trying to get what we want or need or that for which we deeply hope, to change a situation. But maybe those prayers, in practice could be changing us. All those thoughts and prayers? Maybe God will use them to spur us into action, so we are God's hands and feet.

Whatever the reason, keep at those prayers.

³ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200240e/to_whom_do_we_pray for July 25, 2004, by [The Rev. Dr. John Claypool](#), The Episcopal Church

Praying takes practice, starting with the basics.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Quiet the mind. Draw near to God.

Call God Father or Abba, or whatever name connotes a close relationship to you.

Open up with what is on your mind: joys, regrets, needs, concerns,

Pray boldly:

Ask – and it will be given you.

Search – and you will find.

Knock – and the door will be opened.

And pray the way Christ taught his disciples.

Listen to and savor the words, don't just say them; mean them too.

Because:

Know that God is good.

Know that God is good.

Know that God is good,

God is good, God is good.

God is so good. God is so good.

God is so good,

God's so good to me.