

Luke 11:1–13 (NRSV)

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, Friendship and What Will the Neighbors Think?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Luke 11:1-13

Jesus prayed, a lot. The Gospel of Luke alone describes Jesus at prayer on something like fifteen different occasions. Jesus prays almost as often as he heals and works miracles. It's a big part of his life. You can't miss it. And his disciples certainly noticed.

Finally they asked him, "Tell us how to pray." Think about it for a moment. Jesus disciples are not natural contemplatives. They are doers. They were fishermen and farmers, and there was even a tax collector. They were drawn to Jesus by his populist message of fairness and care for the poor. Healing the sick and lame resonated with them. Healing and standing up for justice had results they could point to. They were actions, just like fishing or plowing or collecting taxes. The disciples understood these things. Following Jesus simply meant that they spent their energy working in a different field, so to speak.

But prayer they didn't understand. Prayer was passive. Years ago, when I began practicing meditation, my father quipped, "Well, I don't know what happened to Dudley. He used to take charge. Now he's sitting on a cushion waiting for something good to happen." His point was clear. The Lord helps those who help themselves. If you want something good to happen, you've got to get out there and do something.

The disciples found Jesus confusing. Jesus certainly was out there doing something. But just about as often as he was out there doing something he was off by himself deeply immersed in prayer, sitting around asking for something good to happen.

But the disciples were intrigued. Though they didn't fully understand it, it was clear that prayer was central for Jesus. And they sensed it wasn't just an extra. They grasped at some level that this added dimension of prayer was integral to everything that Jesus did. And even if they were most comfortable as doers and accomplishers, truth be told, they had spiritual and existential questions just like everybody has. And they knew that all the good works in the world didn't solve all of those problems. Why is one man blind and another sees? Why do the unjust seem to thrive so often? What does a relationship with God look like? Why would I want one? Do I ask God for things, like to heal my sickness? And if I ask God for things, why doesn't God answer me more often? And what is it that Jesus gets from his relationship with God? What is it that he gets that we are missing? These were questions the disciples had, not unlike the ones we have, too.

Finally, after following Jesus all over the Galilee and through Samaria, all the way to Jerusalem, finally after a long time of noticing how much Jesus was praying, the disciples screw up their courage. "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

Jesus answered them without hesitation. And his answer was what we call the Lord's Prayer. As we said earlier this morning, we use words that Jesus taught his disciples to use. Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. That is, O God, may your name be treated as holy, may your name be honored, or as one translation has it, may you reveal your full and true being to us.

Right away the disciples are taught to pray to God who is transcendent, who is beyond them and more powerful. The first step in their prayer is to put all their own efforts in second place behind a God whom they honor and recognize.

It continues, Your kingdom come. That is, God, set the world aright. Jesus teaches them to acknowledge God's power and preeminence, and also that God has a vision for the world that is greater than any vision they have. Thy kingdom come.

But then the prayer turns to the everyday. It's not a pie in the sky prayer. Give us enough to eat today, our daily bread. Forgive our sins. Forgive us where we fall short. And in Luke's version of the prayer the disciples are taught to ask God for forgiveness because the disciples forgive other people. Interesting. The prayer presumes that they forgive others. One suspects that the prayer isn't so much reporting facts—that they are perfect in forgiving others. It's also a goad to practice being better at forgiving others, because if we aren't trying hard to forgive others, why would we expect that God to forgive us. Jesus never loses sight of the deep connections between our realms and God's.

So, we see that the prayer isn't entirely passive after all. Both God's doing and our doing are important. Indeed, they are intimately connected.

Going on it says, And bring us not into the time of trial. Lead us not into temptation is how we pray it. It acknowledges our humanity, our human frailty, our inability to resist things in this world that will corrupt us. The disciples are taught to pray an honest plea—God, keep those things away from us, for the flesh is weak.

It's a beautiful prayer, isn't it? Notice, it's not about salvation by believing the right thing. It's not about getting into heaven. It's about being in a relationship with God whom we honor and turn to for help. It's about having enough in this life but not being tempted by greed for extraneous things that would corrupt us. And it's about praying that God's vision for the world come into reality.

It's a beautiful prayer. But Jesus seems to have been aware that the disciples, or at least some of them, were rolling their eyes a little by now. Look around, they think to themselves. Where's the evidence of God's power? Where's any evidence that God's vision for the world is getting a foothold anywhere? And I'm tempted all the time, they say. And by the way, I'm not that good at forgiveness, either, they add.

Jesus understood these doubts rumbling through the disciples' minds, and so, with hardly taking a breath he launches into a parable that seems to only make things more confusing.

You're not sure God will answer your prayer? Well, let me tell you about a man, says Jesus. Suddenly a friend from out of town drops in unannounced in the middle of the night. Now, remember, they didn't have Facebook and text messaging back then. A friend coming a long distance might come unannounced and late at night. Anyway, the host is in a bind. He has nothing to serve his guest to eat. The local Shaw's Market is already closed. He has no choice. Reluctantly he goes to his friend and neighbor next door, beats on the door knocker, wakes him up and tells his neighbor his predicament.

To which the neighbor replies, what? The neighbor replies, "What's the matter with you? It's after midnight. Everyone's already in bed." In those days that would have meant that the whole family would have been in a tiny room together, and if anyone was still asleep after this intrusion, they wouldn't be after that man climbed over everyone. He says, "No, I'm not getting up. Go away before you wake up everyone."

It's doubtful that the disciples are gaining much clarity at this point. You can almost see James turn to John and saying, "I told you we shouldn't have asked him about this prayer stuff."

Finally Jesus seems to bring home the point. Well, even if the neighbor won't get out of bed at first, he says, if you keep beating on his door, he will finally get up and give you what you want. In other words, if the host makes himself a big enough pain in the behind, the neighbor will get up and give him some bread just to shut him up. Ergo, if God doesn't give you what you pray for, keep at it. Make yourself a menace. Don't give God a moment's rest, and finally God will relent to get rid of you. Really? That's how prayer works?

Well, we know that Jesus often tells stories that work at several levels. One of the things that gets in the way our understanding those levels, I think, is that we take Jesus so seriously that we miss his sense of humor. Of course Jesus knows that this picture of God as a reluctant provider whom you must wear down with your persistence is ridiculous.

It's ridiculous, but does get us thinking that maybe we should be persistent in our prayers. Some things don't come all at once. Some prayers will be answered differently from how we expect them to be, or even different from how we want them to be. And the bringing about of God's vision for the world and our lives is a complicated and long-term process. Our persistent prayer is one way that we stay engaged with God throughout. It is the anchor for us to continue doing our part. It is the compass for paying attention so we can discern God's part. Jesus uses this funny and ridiculous story to make a very serious point. Prayer isn't about instant gratification.

But there's more. In the culture of ancient Israel hospitality had been one of the most important social values from time immemorial. So Jesus plays with the disciples around that issue, too. The story lets them identify with the poor sleeping neighbor. It's midnight. Everyone's asleep. The knock on the door is an intrusion. We can all identify with his response. "Come on. Give me a break. It's in the middle of the night." The disciples could identify with it, too. But they would have known, as any of you would have known, that after that initial response, probably muttered under our breath, the bonds of friendship and neighborliness would kick in. Who of us would turn away a good friend in need in the middle of the night? And in the culture of Jesus' time hospitality was such a primary value that if the neighbor did refuse to get up, all of the other neighbors would have judged him very harshly. Indeed, one translator doesn't say that the neighbor responds because of the host's persistence. John Nolland translates it this way: "I say to you, even if he will not get up and give him [anything] because he is his friend, because of the prospect of him being shamed he will get up and give him as much as he needs." In other words, the prospect of the neighborhood hearing the continued knocking of the host and the continued refusal of the neighbor is enough to get the neighbor out of bed without delay.

On this level the story has then, another slightly different turn. From this angle the disciples are led to remember that hospitality is a core human value. And if we humans practice hospitality, albeit imperfectly and with some reluctance, how much more we can expect hospitality from God whose love for us is perfect. Here the message is to persist in prayer with confidence, for no matter how things look, we can trust that God is faithful and reliable and loving, and that God will not leave us alone in the night knocking at the door.

In that light Jesus says, "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." Jesus has covered a lot of ground in a short space—from daily bread to God's vision for the world, from being protected from corrupting temptation to encountering God's holiness. Most of all Jesus helps the disciples see the intimate connection between their relationship with God and their lives and relationships in the world. In prayer, Jesus says, knock and all this will be opened to you. How beautiful is that? Amen.