

Pastor's Message – 7/24/22  
Luke 11:1-4

There may be millions of books of prayers, books on how to pray, and books about the power of prayer. According to a Pew Research report, 68% of American Christians say they pray at least daily. People rely on prayer when making personal decisions and consider prayer an essential part of their identity. We assume that since Jesus prayed, that means that we also should pray. And the disciples apparently thought the same thing. They saw their teacher praying and they asked him to teach them how to pray.

This week we learn from Jesus what to pray and how to pray. If most Christian congregations know any "written" prayer, it is most likely the Lord's Prayer, though in a version that actually appears in neither Luke nor Matthew. Once upon the time, everyone knew some version of the Lord's Prayer; that is not always the case anymore, so we include the words on the PowerPoint on Sunday, and I always print it out on my funeral bulletins.

Luke's gospel presents us with what may be an unfamiliar version of the Lord's Prayer and a context in which it is clear the disciples were looking for Jesus to give them a specific prayer to pray. "Lord, teach us to pray" meant, and means, "Lord, give us a prayer — your prayer that identifies us as your disciples." Giving them a prayer was not giving them magic words. It was, however, giving them language that would both mark and form them in their relationship with God and their Master. So that was what Jesus gave them — a specific prayer for them to use. It is short, densely packed, and memorable. "When you pray," Jesus said, "say this."

Someone has said, "Prayer is the oxygen of our spiritual lungs." But sometimes our prayer resembles "Hail, Mary" football passes. We are suddenly faced with a crisis, or an emergency need, and we gasp out a prayer of petition. Some of those prayers are short; some of our prayers are long. (1) Prayer is not making speeches to God. (2) Prayer is bringing all our concerns to God in the simplest possible fashion. (3) Much of our praying is not asking at all, but the expression of repentance and gratitude.

The standard Jesus has given us for how we are to pray is the rubric of the Lord's Prayer. But notice here that Jesus doesn't actually instruct the disciples TO pray. He simply answers their question about HOW to pray. Jesus says when we pray we should approach God like a child going to a parent. He says, "Pray like this: God, we honor you on earth more than we honor our own flesh and blood parents. Please come to rule our lives every day that we will have on this earth. Help us to not worry about the future; we ask only for enough bread to get through this day. Don't forgive us our sins until we have found a way to forgive every person who has done us wrong. And please God, do not test our faith too much because we know that we are weak and that we will surely fail."

As the Afro-American spiritual suggests, we all stand in the need of prayer, and we are encouraged to make our whole lives a prayer.

So, does your prayer consist of isolated incidents? Do you have a specific routine for prayer: a specific book or time of day or length of time? When you pray, what kinds of things do you tend to include in your prayers?

Are your prayers different when praying alone than they are when you are praying aloud in worship?

What is different? Why is it different?

The Lord's Prayer is a dangerous prayer and Jesus' teaching can challenge you in your own practice of prayer, both privately and corporately.

You might just have to change the way you think and live and pray.

Luke 11:5-13

Dr. Sheldon Cooper is one of the lead characters on the once popular television comedy *The Big Bang Theory*. Played by actor Jim Parsons, Sheldon is a twenty- or thirty-something theoretical physicist with two Ph.D.'s. Although brilliant, he is socially awkward -- to the point of having almost no interpersonal awareness or skills. Consequently, he is given to saying and doing inappropriate things at inappropriate times. His narcissistic tendencies also move him to expect others to stop whatever they are doing and respond immediately to anything he perceives that he wants or needs.

For instance, if one of the other characters is asleep and Sheldon wants something, he does not hesitate to go to that individual's door, knock three times very rapidly, and call out that person's name. Without pausing for a response, he knocks three more times and calls out that person's name again. Over and over, he repeats this routine without pausing: "Knock, knock, knock, Penney; knock, knock, knock, Penney; knock, knock, knock, Penney." The only way others get relief from his insistent banging on the door is to open it and respond to his request.

Do you wonder sometimes if that is the point of Jesus' parable? Is He really trying to say that sometimes God is sleeping, and we have to keep knocking to wake Him up before He will respond to our prayers?

It may be helpful to go back and look at the parable from a 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine point-of-view.

Luke gives us this parable based on a Middle Eastern understanding of the requirements of hospitality. Hearing with our 21<sup>st</sup>-century ears, we might misinterpret this parable, feeling sorry for the one who was awakened in the middle of the night by a rude and irresponsible neighbor who was too lazy to prepare something for his own houseguest. Jesus' listeners would have heard something quite different.

A traveler who came to the home of someone in the village was considered to be a guest of the entire town. Inasmuch as hospitality was (and still is) a tremendously important cultural value of that area of the world, anyone in town could be called upon to help make the visitor comfortable and feel welcome. An unexpected guest at night could be a cause of particular anxiety, if one has no leftover bread from the day. At night you do not build the fire for baking, but the woman of the house might be aware that the

woman next door had baked a few extra loaves that morning. The neighbors would consider it an honor to help you out of your bind.

The neighbor in Jesus' story doesn't act according to the way the listeners would expect. He refused even to get out of bed and answer the door, but shouts from within: "LEAVE US ALONE! THE CHILDREN ARE IN BED. YOU CAN'T EXPECT ME TO GET UP AND HELP YOU!" Well, of course, the friend could and did expect the neighbor to get out of bed and offer whatever he had to ease the discomfort of the other.

Finally, when the friend continued knocking and calling out for help, the lazy and selfish neighbor forces himself out of bed and to the door, just to shut the guy up. "How much more," said Jesus, "is a good God willing to hear you than this awful neighbor?" You may think your prayers are unheard, that no one is listening. Nevertheless, God hears. Always. God is the good neighbor who jumps out of bed immediately and offers just what is needed at just the right time.

The parable for us is not about a God who needs to be awakened and cajoled to help us, it is about our attitude to a God who is always ready to hear. It is more about our attitude of prayer: to continue coming to the God in prayer.

Once upon a time, pre-Covid, we would place kneelers out on Communion Sunday at the Waupun United Methodist Church for those who want to kneel. Other times, people will come forward and take Communion standing. Sometimes during our worship, we kneel in prayer, sometimes we stand for prayer, sometimes we sit for prayer. All are valid but all may denote a different attitude.

The theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, observes that praying in the prone position, i.e., lying face down, denotes subservience, whereas the kneeling position — head bowed, eyes closed — speaks of an attitude of contrition and helplessness. Prayer while standing, with arms uplifted and outstretched, is a prayer of expectation in which the pray-er invites God to come into his life, indicating as well that the pray-er is ready to receive what God has to give.

Prayer is all about having the right attitude, the right connection and relationship with God. In fact, Jesus gave his disciples their own prayer so that they might live a "wired" life -- being "connected" to the Spirit. The "Lord's Prayer" was never intended to be a creed or a catechism, repeated exactly the same by all Christians at every stage of their lives. The "Lord's Prayer" is only a template, a blueprint, showing us how we can gain access to the power and love and grace God offers to us daily. Jesus says that all we have to do is ask and God is ready, able, and willing to give us all that we need.

Although the word "Father" can be problematic if it is too closely associated with a male person, it does, in this great prayer, denote our new close relationship with God in Christ. I try to be sensitive to the situations in which the word "Father" may not engender feelings of love and comfort from people if they had not had a good relationship with their earthly father. Every Father's Day, I offer a Litany in which we pray for [those men] "who have been unable to be a source of strength, who have not responded to their children and have not sustained their families."

In this last passage of our Bible reading today, the word "Father" is the personal word which transforms our very lives into being the children of the household. It is a prayer which, when uttered from the first, says, "We thank thee that we have a father, and not a maker; that thou hast begotten us, and not molded us as images of clay; that we have come forth of thy heart, and have not been fashioned by thy hands. It must be so. Only the heart of a father (or a mother) is able to create. We rejoice in it, and bless thee that we know it. We thank thee for thyself. Be what thou art --our root and life, our beginning and end, our all in all. Come home to us. Thou livest; therefore we live. In thy light we see. Thou art --that is all our song."

Calling God "Father" or "Mother" or the generic "Parent" identifies who we are, that we are neither self-made nor self-sufficient. We are children of God who never outgrow our need for God. And in the larger scheme of things, we are sinners in need of forgiveness. These aren't ideas that we may always be comfortable with. Those who have prayed the Lord's Prayer with an open heart, as an act of humble discipleship, know that the prayer is powerful and even dangerous. In praying the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to lead us down some risky and unfamiliar paths. Praying the Lord's Prayer compromises the sense of security we fumble to maintain within our own power.

Jesus then says that when we pray, we are to take the attitude that we are God's beloved children. This business about the fish and the snake, and the egg and the scorpion, is a way of saying that God is like a loving parent who already knows our needs even before we ask. And it is an assurance that God always has our best interests in mind. Jesus says clearly: "How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask" (11:13).

God longs to love us! One of the chief ways God is able to express that love and care for us is through responding to our prayers—including "The Lord's Prayer," but not limited to it.

So, when we pray, we not only listen to God, give attention to God's word and God's direction in our lives, and so love God.

We also let God love us.

So pray as Jesus taught.

And pray for whatever you need, or others need.

Pray because you love God.

And let God, in your praying, love you.