

Sermon: Keep On Asking!

Luke 11:1-13

Jonah 2:1-9; Rev. 5:1-8

Rev. Dr. Paul H. Thwaite

July 25, 2010

OLCC,P – Michigan

Luke 11:1-13

1 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." 2 He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. 3 Give us each day our daily bread. 4 And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." 5 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; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 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.' 8 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. 9 **"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. 10** For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 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!"

Last week we celebrated the 136th anniversary of the founding of the Orchard Lake Chapel on these shores. We remembered 3 foundation stones and building blocks upon which this ministry has been built in the past and by which it will continue to grow and prosper in the future: worship, faith development, and mission in the name of Christ. In preparing for today's message I realized I had forgotten a very important one in addition to those three: Prayer! Interestingly enough, this week's lectionary passage from Luke 11 is about Jesus' teaching on prayer for the disciples, so God has called my bluff! We would not be where we are today, we would not be who we are today, whether individually or corporately, without the gift of prayer!

Today's passage begins with the statement that Jesus was praying in a certain place. Prayer was a vital part of Jesus' life and ministry while on the earth. He prayed for 40 days and nights at the time of his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. He spent the night in prayer before choosing the 12 who would be his disciples. He went off in times of private prayer when the crowds were pressing in on him to be healed. And at Gethsemane he wrestled mightily in prayer as his mission came to its climax. I am sure there were many more times spent in prayer by Jesus during his earthly ministry in addition to these I have mentioned. Luke notes that his disciples were aware of Jesus' time spent in prayer because once he finished praying, his disciples asked him to teach them to pray. What an important reminder for us that others are always watching our lives and can be encouraged and challenged by our faith journey.

In response to their request, Jesus offers the model for prayer we know today as the Lord's Prayer. Luke's version is briefer than Matthew's but covers the same basic components of adoration and petition before the Father. But then Luke records a brief parable from the lips of Jesus that is unique to his account, a parable spoken by Jesus to go alongside the Lord's Prayer and, presumably, to further teach and instruct the disciples about how to pray. This brief parable, known as the parable of the friend at midnight, sheds additional light on what our prayer experience is all about. But it is a little tricky and not what it may seem to be at first glance, so we need to take a few moments to unpack what Jesus was trying to teach here.

The story is simple and well-suited to the understanding of Jesus' listeners in that day, a little more challenging for us to understand across the miles and the years. It's the story of a person who has a friend arrive late one night at his home. It was not unusual for travelers in Palestine to travel late at night to avoid the extreme heat of the daytime hours. It was also very important to show hospitality to friends and even strangers who needed food to eat and a place to stay. But the host realizes the food of the day has already been eaten and more will not be acquired 'till morning. He is in a bind. What can he do? So he welcomes the friend in, begs patience for a moment, and heads for his neighbor's house. Who among us hasn't asked a neighbor for some assistance in a hospitality pinch, right? A cup of sugar, a bit of milk, just to get us through.

There's one problem – just as he was, he knows his neighbor will already be at rest for the night with his family. Should he even bother him at this late hour? What if he wakes the children in the home? Will he have any chance to receive a favorable response? But his need is real and his friend is important, so he is unashamed to knock on the door of his neighbor seeking what he needs. And he is unashamed and persistent to keep on asking even after an initial rebuff from his sleepy, somewhat cranky neighbor. And yes, in his persistence in making his request, he receives the assistance he needs and offers the care for his friend he longed to provide. End of story, right?

Well, not so fast. What is Jesus really teaching here? Is this call to persistent asking an invitation to make such a nuisance of ourselves in prayer seeking what we need that our nagging will force God to answer and provide what we ask? Fortunately the rest of the passage helps us place this call to persistence in its proper context. As Jesus calls the disciples to ask, seek, and knock, he draws an analogy for them regarding a parent and a child. When a child, perhaps their child, asks for a fish, will that parent give them a snake instead? That would be unimaginable! Or if the child asked for an egg, would a parent give them a scorpion instead? Impossible we reply, along with Jesus' disciples, in our mind and heart. Then comes the punch line: if we, as fallible and often evil human beings know this is wrong and know how to give to those we love the things they need, how much more will our loving heavenly Father respond to our requests by giving us what we need most – his very presence in the person of the Holy Spirit! We are not trying to nag a sleepy, somewhat cranky God into getting up from his slumber to provide what we ask – we are bringing our needs and petitions to a loving heavenly Father who longs to answer his children's prayers according to his riches in Jesus Christ and his purposes for us in becoming more and more like him. The better translation for the thrust of Jesus' message in this parable is that *we should not be ashamed* to be knocking on the door of God's heavenly mansion to petition for those things we know are gifts to us from God's hand. He is not a cranky neighbor, a miserly old man who begrudges us that which we need. He is a loving parent wanting to hear our cries, our hurts, our needs and our praises so that he can shower down upon us what he longs to give in response to our requests!

Philip Yancey in his book entitled Prayer says this: “The real value of persistent prayer is not so much that we get what we want as that we become the person we should be.” Prayer is about relationship – about our connection with God “Our Father” as the Lord’s Prayer puts it – the one who longs for us as his children to be tugging on his hand and heart and saying “this is what I need today, Daddy – can you do it for me – PLEASE???” And we are not ashamed to keep asking as long as we sense it is the desire of our heart and God’s heart. Maybe, over time as we pray, we will come to realize it’s best for us not to have what we are asking for right away, or perhaps not at all, but we know our Father will do what is best. And so our prayers become our seeking and searching and knocking that bring us over and over again back to the heart of our Father who loves us and longs to give us what is best.

That’s what Jesus is saying prayer is all about. We as Christians, and this congregation as a community of faith, are who we are because of our ongoing commitment to keep asking for God’s will to be done, to keep searching for those things we know will be pleasing and honoring to God and a blessing to others around us, to keep knocking on the door of God’s kingdom purposes so they may become more real in our lives, our congregation, our community, and our world.

William Wilberforce, the famous Englishman largely responsible for ending the slave trade in the British Empire, knew slavery was an affront to God and a crushing burden on humanity, slave and slave trader alike. He made his first speech against the slave trade in May 1789 and submitted his first bill to end it in 1791, seeing it defeated by a vote of 163-88, a landslide. It would be another 16 years of speeches and bills, of asking and seeking and knocking, until the abolition bill was passed by a vote of 283-16, an even greater landslide. Senator William Proxmire made 3,211 speeches over the course of 19 years in Congress, until his colleagues finally passed a bill outlawing genocide.

Each of us, in issues as great as these or in the simple, everyday events of our individual unremarkable lives, are called to come to God and be unashamed to keep on asking, keep on searching, keep on knocking for God to meet us at the point of our need and bring us to the place of his provision for those needs. We have a loving Father waiting for our prayers to come to him. What a wonderful invitation and opportunity we have – indeed, Lord Jesus, teach us to pray!

Amen!