

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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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."

[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!"

BRITISH OPEN LESSON

Last week I skipped my weekly trip to Fat Boy's Restaurant after the worship service in order to watch the British Open golf tournament from the Carnoustie Club in Scotland. This is perhaps one of the most exciting golf

courses in the world, and the 18th hole provides a wonderful challenge at the last. No lead is secure when you're facing a steep faced creek that snakes around the course. It comes into play from the tee and on your second shot.

Several years ago the Frenchman, Jean Vandeveldde had a three shot lead coming into this last hole. After driving into hip high rough several times and the creek once, he managed to make a smooth triple bogey 7 on the last hole, losing his three shot lead and eventually losing the championship in a playoff. I remember my wife, who usually could care less about golf, watching in fascination and saying, "This is hard to believe. Is he a professional?"

I didn't think anything could equal that, but this year's tournament came close. The flashy young Spaniard, Sergio Garcia was vying to win his first major tournament. But, in the last round he was being challenged by the Irishman, Padrig Harrington who was also trying to win his first major tournament.

Harrington had a one stroke lead going to the 18th tee. But, then history seemed to repeat itself. The ghost of Jean Vandeveldde loomed large as Paddy dumped two shots into the water, and did well to make a double bogey six. Thus, he turned a one shot lead into a one shot deficit.

All Sergio had to do was make a par on the last to win the tournament.

But, the play was slow in front of him. A groundskeeper took an excruciatingly long time to rake the bunker. Sergio's second shot made it over the water but was short of the green. He chipped within ten feet of the hole. If he made the putt, he would be the British Open Champion, and the reporters would quit dogging him about why he had never won a major championship.

The putt lipped out of the hole. Sergio was defeated in a playoff.

At the press conference following the tournament, his despair was obvious. He talked about having to wait so long in the fairway. He talked about how unlucky he was when his ball hit the flag, and then bounced far away from the hole.

He became very angry with the reporters, and suggested that when he played golf, he had to play more than the golf course. The fans, the players, the reporters, and even the “golf gods” were against him.

OUR RESPONSE TO DIFFICULT DAYS

None of us will ever have a chance to win a British Open. But, we do know what it’s like to have the world come down around our ears. We do know what it’s like to hit the ball in the water over and over again, to be tested by circumstances and wonder if heaven itself is not arrayed against our best efforts.

All of us have been tempted to give up or to blame our misfortune on someone else or even blame God. We are tempted to say, “If God exists and cares about me, He wouldn’t let this happen to me.”

I watched a debate between some Christians and some atheists, and the atheists used line of reasoning to attack the idea of God. They asked, “If God exists, then why do we have cancer? A loving, caring God would not allow such a dread disease to exist.”

It’s this circumstance that Jesus addresses when he teaches his disciples how to pray. He tells them, “Don’t lose heart. Don’t give up. When it comes to prayer, perseverance is a virtue. Keep on asking. Keep on knocking.” Be persistent.

Or as the bumper sticker put it in a take off on a Nike ad, “Life is short. Pray hard.”

But, persistence alone is not enough.

We can persist in believing the wrong thing about prayer and the nature of God, but that will not lead us to faith but to despair and unbelief. For example, the underlying belief of the atheist who did not believe in God was that if a loving God did exist, our lives would be free of the trouble.

But, this is not true. The Bible does not teach this. God does not make our life a bed of roses. Indeed, Jesus said that when we dare to follow him things

in a way might even get worse. Our faith might require us to make decisions that will turn us against the tide of popular opinion.

Don't judge the effectiveness of your prayer life by how easy your life becomes; judge the effectiveness of your prayer life by the strength of your spiritual state during the tough times. And the time of testing will inevitably come to us all.

And when the time of testing comes, some find the faith to carry on no matter what happens. And some use their misfortune as an excuse, a reason to quit trying altogether. What makes the difference? Why do some find spiritual strength despite adversity while others find a reason to just pack it in and quit?

THE NATURE OF GOD AND PRAYER

I think that the difference often lies in a person's view of God. In order to persevere in the time of testing, we need to have an adequate understanding of the nature of God, and we need to know how to pray. Both of those things are necessary for a healthy and growing faith.

Some people seem to think that praying to God is like "putting coins in a vending machine." If you make enough prayers and pull the right slot, out pops the answer that we want. You would think that most thoughtful Christians would reject this view out of hand, but it continues to be a popular view of how God and prayer work despite its obvious weaknesses.

If that's our view of God, then we will be disappointed. More than that, we will actually be angry with God and everyone else for that matter. We will feel that life is not fair. We did our part, but God did not do His part.

But, the Lord's Prayer, the model prayer teaches us that this should not be how we approach God. God is not a vending machine who gives us what we want if only we put in enough prayers.

FATHER

God is first of all our Father. This is how we address God, and the word stresses the fact that prayer is first and foremost a close personal relationship.

Prayer is like an intimate, caring parent/child relationship. And that relationship involves a passionate give and take. It is a relationship that is always growing and changing depending upon the circumstances of life.

This past week I was making a purchase at the new Best Buy store in Kissimmee. As many of you know, when you make a purchase at that store, you get in a single line and wait for the next cashier.

And what do they put in the shelves beside that line? They put rows and rows of candy. It looks good, but it's not good for you.

And in front of me a young mother had to deal with this trap. Her young sons picked up candy from the shelves as we waited and said, "Please mom, can I have it. Please." And over and over again she would patiently and calmly say, "I'm sorry, but that's not good for you."

When children do this, I automatically go into daddy mode, and I wanted ever so bad to say, "Listen to your mother."

But, I didn't. Instead, I began to reflect on this week's lesson from Scripture. I wondered if this is how we often appear to God. I wonder if we don't often ask for things that are not good for us, and then are disappointed when God tells us no.

God loves us like a good parent, but like a good parent, God can also tell us no. Like a good parent God will struggle with us to keep us from doing those things that would cause us harm.

People often say that God doesn't hear their prayers. I think God hears their prayers; they just don't like the answer that He gives them! And so like those children trying to get their mother to buy them candy, we contend with God. We try to change God's mind because we're sure that our way is the right way.

HOLY

The Scripture tells us that our relationship with God is not a relationship based upon equality. Though God loves us like a mother or a father, the Lord's Prayer also teaches us that God is also holy. We can approach God with confidence, knowing that God is our Father, and we are His children. God wants the best for us.

But, this parent/child relationship has another dimension. It is also a human/divine relationship. Prayer should always carry with it a tone of respect and awe. Prayer should never be flippant. Prayer should never just be about what we want. Prayer is entering into a place that is at once familiar and comforting as well as awesome and overwhelming.

We pray to our Father, but He is our Father who is in heaven. His Name is sacred; His name is hallowed.

This is something that I think we are in danger of losing in the modern church. This divine/human encounter is being replaced by a familiarity and easy going attitude that just doesn't seem appropriate in the presence of God.

I think this is one reason that we sometimes struggle in our prayer life. We have lost this sense that God is holy. We have forgotten how to enter that sacred space on the mountaintop where we encounter the one true God, the One who is above us and beyond us.

THY KINGDOM

Related to this inability to experience the divine is the fact that many of us fail to appreciate that life is not about us and our needs. It's about God and God's kingdom. After addressing God as Father and Holy, the model prayer tells us to pray, "Thy kingdom come."

I think that the parts of the model prayer build upon each other. If we believe that God is like a compassionate parent who is also the holy one, then we are willing to trust the future to that God. We no longer have to try and control things.

Instead, we entrust ourselves and our world into the hands of this Almighty and Loving God. Instead of trying to build our own kingdom we abandon ourselves to that kingdom that comes.

This is a great relief and a great comfort. We believe that God will work things out in His own way and His own time. It's not all up to us.

DAILY BREAD VERSUS ANXIOUS TOIL

In the meantime, God gives us what we need for this day. We pray "give us this day our daily bread". As God fed his people manna or "bread from heaven" each day in the wilderness, so God provides for our daily needs.

Sometimes people who have great wealth cannot enjoy what they have because they are so focused on keeping that wealth in the future. In contrast the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread" directs our focus on this day because this day is all any of us can count on. The future belongs to God, and the model prayer teaches us that we can confidently leave that future in God's hands.

Do you remember what Jesus taught about anxiety? He first told a parable about a man who had a bumper crop one year. The man's response to this good fortune was to use this crop to secure his future; He vowed to build bigger barns. He wanted to be sure that he would never go hungry and that his future would be secure.

But, Jesus said that it didn't work out. The man failed to take into account that his life was in God's hands ... not in his own hands. And so that very night he would face his own mortality. His soul would be required of him.

Now the moral of that parable was not to be scared that God might come get us at any time. The moral of the parable was that we shouldn't be anxious about the future because the future is something that we cannot control. Our barns can never be big enough to secure our future. It's more important to be thankful for what God has provided us today than to be overly concerned about what we may need.

In response to this story of the man who wanted to build bigger barns Jesus warned, “Don’t be anxious about tomorrow. Just as God takes care of creation, the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, so God will take care of you in you.” (cf. Luke 12:22-34) When we approach life with an appreciation for our daily bread, for the good things in our life this day, we live with a heart full of gratitude and a remarkably anxiety free mind.

Sometimes when people are deeply troubled by a problem in their life they say something like, “I’m just trying to live one day at a time.” Or, to put it another way, “Don’t try to do everything. Just do the next thing.” I’ve found that this approach can be quite helpful. By narrowing their focus to the joys and struggles of one day, they are able to avoid being overly anxious about an uncertain future.

This is a good attitude for all of us to take. If the compassionate, holy God will eventually bring about His kingdom, a Kingdom in which every hurt will be healed and every tear will be wiped away, then we don’t have to focus so much of our time and energy worrying about the future. We can instead enjoy the day that we have been given; we can take pleasure in the provision of God that comes to us this day.

Quite often I will visit someone who is going through a terrible time in their life. Perhaps a loved one is critically ill or they are having a significant personal problem. But, because they are focused on their daily bread, on all that is good in their life instead of all that is bad; they can give thanks to God.

In a situation that would cause many people to become bitter, they are able to praise God and trust God for the future.

They know what it means to enjoy daily bread and believe that God will provide what they need for the journey ahead. Their circumstances force them to just give thanks for their daily bread, and in the process they are not as worried about an uncertain future.

A phrase that has often fascinated me is one that the Apostle Paul used.

He talked about the “peace of God” that is beyond comprehension. In the middle of trouble some people are profoundly peaceful and happy.

DEBT FORGIVENESS

The Bible teaches us that our ability to experience God as a compassionate Father who provides for our daily needs is conditioned by our attitude toward others. If we are always worried about the person who disappointed us or failed us in some way, the person that is in our debt, we will not be able to worship God.

Jesus told his disciples that if they were getting ready to offer a sacrifice in the temple and thought of someone with whom they had a significant problem; they were to drop that sacrifice, make things right with the person and then make their offering in the temple.

An unforgiving heart cannot understand the compassion of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

It’s not that God withholds forgiveness from us when we hold a grudge. It’s just that we isolate ourselves from God with our own unforgiving attitude.

Those who do not practice forgiveness and grace cannot understand it or receive it from others ... including God.

LEARNING TO PRAY

Some people think that praying is as natural as breathing. In some ways that might be true. Even the unbeliever might utter a prayer when tragedy strikes suddenly. But, in order for prayer to be effective it must be learned.

We thought about how we learned to pray as children at Bible Study this past week. My teacher said that I should shut my eyes to keep out distractions and fold my hands so that I wouldn’t be tempted to play with something. I was to kneel to assume a worshipful attitude. Sometimes we would even pray the Lord’s Prayer together.

There was nothing wrong with that. Learning the Lord's Prayer has been an important part of many a person's spiritual formation. But, I want to suggest to you today that we need to go beyond just praying the Lord's Prayer. We must learn to pray in that manner. We must learn to use the Lord's Prayer as a model, as a way to develop and deepen our prayer life.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. You pray, "Forgive us our debts." Think about the debts that you owe. What have you done wrong this week or this past month or this past year? Whom have you wronged? What would it mean to be forgiven of that sin? If God were to forgive you, is there a person with whom you need to make amends?

As you can see, though the model prayer doesn't change, the content of that prayer will change each day depending upon the circumstances of your life. In this way the Word of God becomes a living word that is relevant and helpful.

When it comes right down to it, there is only one gift that we really need. It isn't winning the lottery or the British Open or any material blessing. The one gift that we really need and should seek is the gift of God's Spirit, God's presence.

And that's the one gift that God is more than willing to give. Our lesson for today ends with this statement. Just as an earthly father knows how to give good gifts to his children, the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask for it.

That's what I want all of us to ask from God. I want us to pray, "Lord, give us your Spirit. Lord, make us aware of your presence." In the end that's all any of us need.

Let's pray right now. "Lord, teach us to pray. Fill us with your Spirit and change our hearts with your grace that we might be a gracious people. We entrust ourselves and our future to you. We know that you'll give us what we need this day and every day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."