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Lessons in Luke: Jesus on Prayer

Luke 11:1-13

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“How’s your prayer life?”

We were having such a nice conversation, talking about sports and family and a little bit about church. But then my friend asked me that question, “How’s your prayer life?”

I think I responded with, “Fine” and then promptly moved onto another subject. Because the truth was, my prayer life wasn’t fine. It was nearly non-existent. I had lost it along the way. It took a spiritual director some years later to help me to understand that while my theology and my understanding of who God is had changed dramatically over the years, my understanding of prayer hadn’t grown much since Sunday School. And that needed change.

Hold onto that story as we turn to today’s Scripture reading from Luke 11 as Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer:

Once Jesus was in a certain place praying. As he finished, one of his disciples came to him and said, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

Jesus said, “This is how you should pray:

“Father, may your name be kept holy.

May your Kingdom come soon.

Give us each day the food we need,

and forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us.

And don’t let us yield to temptation.”

Then, teaching them more about prayer, he used this story: “Suppose you went to a friend’s house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You say to him, ‘A friend of mine has just arrived for a visit, and I have nothing for him to eat.’ And suppose he calls out from his bedroom, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is locked for the night, and my family and I are all in bed. I can’t help you.’ But I tell you this—though he won’t do it for friendship’s sake, if you keep knocking

long enough, he will get up and give you whatever you need because of your shameless persistence.

“And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

“You fathers—if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Friends, we could easily do a six-week series about prayer based on those 13 verses...and maybe we should...but for today I want to highlight just three things about prayer based on Jesus’ teaching, and then I want to share what I’ve learned about prayer.

First, prayer is learned. It doesn’t just come naturally. That’s why Jesus’ disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us how to pray.” And I’ve discovered that while many of us learned how to pray in Sunday School, few of us were taught much more than “Now I lay me down to sleep,” “God is good, God is great, and we thank him for our food,” and the Lord’s Prayer. But I’ve discovered that prayer isn’t just learned once. We learn and re-learn it throughout life. As we change, so does our practice of prayer.

Second, prayer is conversation with a loving father. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he taught them to address God as “Father.” He wanted them to know that they weren’t approaching a cold, distant deity who needed to be begged or sacrificed to in order to win God’s attention. When they came to God in prayer, they were coming to talk with a Father who loved them.

I love it when one of our boys calls me up and says, “Hey, let’s go to lunch and spend some time together.”

I love it when one of our boys is struggling with a problem and wants to talk about it.

I love it when one of our boys has a need or something they really want, and I can give it to them.

I love my boys, just like every parent loves their children. And that, Jesus says, is how God feels about us. That's the lens that Jesus wants us to have when we come to God in prayer.

Finally, we can bring everything to God in prayer without reserve, without shame. That's the point of the parable that Jesus tells about the man who had no bread when company unexpectedly came in the night. The point isn't that we need to knock repeatedly on God's door to get God to give us what we ask for. The point of the story is that the man in need wasn't ashamed to wake his neighbor up in the middle of the night for bread because they were friends. What Jesus is teaching about prayer is that we can come to God with anything, any time, as often as we need to because God loves us.

The more time I spent in this passage of Scripture the more it seemed that Jesus was nearly begging us to pray, to never hesitate to come to God in prayer about anything. And yet, sometimes we do struggle to pray. I had nearly stopped praying, which is why I went to see a spiritual director. Like most people, I grew up with this notion that God was "out there" in some cosmic control room. I would send my prayer requests to God, like a kid sending his Christmas list to Santa in the North Pole. But over time, I began to understand that God wasn't "out there" but "in here." In fact, I came to understand through Scripture that God dwells in all things in this world.

In Acts 17, Paul says that in God we "live and move and have our being." If we were fish, God would be the water. And in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that Christ fills all things with himself. How do you pray to a God who is as near as the air that you breathe, a God who is already dwelling within you? That's the question that I brought a spiritual director. Let me share with you how I pray today, not because I think it's the right way or the only way, but because it's another way.

While I've come to believe that all of life is a prayer, every moment a conversation with God, I still spend intentional prayer time in the morning, along with time meditating on Scripture, and, in general, my prayer time includes three parts.

First, gratitude. Gratitude is the practice that magnifies my vision of God's goodness and love. It shapes how I see God, others and my own life. I find it especially helpful to think back through the previous day to consider the big and small things for which I'm

grateful. No matter how difficult the day was, there are always things to give thanks for. I allow this time of gratitude to fill me up, as if it inflates my heart. And some days I feel just about ready to burst.

Second, surrender. I bring to mind any problem I have, any worry, any broken relationship, anything I'm struggling with, and I surrender it all to God. I release it. I used to tell God what I wanted. I used to tell God how to fix my problems. But I realized that God already knows and knows better than I do. Sometimes God seems to give it right back to me, giving me a sense of what I'm supposed to do to fix my own problems, but more often than not I'm filled with a sense of peace and expectation that God is at work in ways I can't see, trusting that all things work for good.

Finally, intercession. That's a fancy church word for "praying for others." This is, perhaps, the most helpful thing I learned from my spiritual director. When I pray for someone that I know is hurting, I don't tell God about their problems, or how to help. Again, God already knows. Instead, I bring that person to mind. If I know them personally, I try to imagine a picture of them in my mind. And I hold each one with loving care for a moment, surrendering them into God's care. Again, sometimes God gives it right back to me, nudging me to respond in some way, but more often than not I'm filled with a sense of peace, knowing that God dwells in them, loves them, and will provide for their needs in ways I may never know.

My spiritual director taught me that prayer isn't about changing God, but about being intentionally present with God in a way that changes me. And he was right. This way of praying has brought me greater peace and greater joy. And as I change, I assume that my prayer life will change, too. And that's okay. There's no one "right way" to pray. But as Jesus makes clear in today's Scripture reading, there is an open and enthusiastic invitation from our loving God to pray.

Today, if my friend were to ask, "How's your prayer life?" I could respond with more than a half-hearted and less-than-honest "fine." Instead, I could respond with a whole-hearted "wonderful!"