

July 24, 2016

TEXT: Luke 11:1–13

TITLE: Fish and Eggs and Snakes and Scorpions, Oh My

The Lord's Prayer

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.'

Perseverance in Prayer

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 to 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!'

I have often said that the reason that I could believe in a God of unconditional love was because I *knew* my father. I was a daddy's girl. I may have walked and talked and acted a lot like my mom, but my father, Pop (I called him, Pop), was my hero. And I knew that there was nothing that I could ever do to make him not love me.

Pop was a quiet, unassuming man, compassionate and tender. He had been to WWII and had learned just what was important, so he did not seem to want much and did not let little things bother him. He grew up in the country and could name all the trees in the woods, could tell the birds by their calls. Had circumstances been different he would have been a veterinarian—as it was everyone, even my mom's mom (his mother in law) agreed that if they were ever ill, they wanted Pop to take care of them. And, of course, He was great with babies and young children. So, right after my younger son was born we moved from Texas to Pittsburgh, in part so that the boys could get to know their grandparents and, in particular, Pop.

We also moved here because there was a Presbyterian seminary here and I had begun to discern a call to enter the ministry. So, in September 1989 I began attending Pittsburgh Seminary with my parents coming up twice a week from Morgantown to watch the boys. But then in May, before the end of my first year of seminary, my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer and given a year to live.

How do we pray?

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. And he gives them a template of praise and imperatives. A short little prayer like “Now I lay me down to sleep” or “Good food, good meat...” but then, almost as though he realizes that little prayer was not really what they were asking for, he returns to their question and gives them one of his parables. A story about knocking on a neighbors door in the middle of the night to get the things needed to meet the demands of hospitality for a guest’s late night (and presumably unplanned) arrival.

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.

Now, I venture to say that, even if you and I knew that the 7–11 was already closed, we might still agree with the friend in bed and ask the neighbor to come back in the morning. But, I would remind you that the rules of hospitality for the Israelites of the time were clear, it was a matter of honor to care for a guest. So, the neighbor is persistent. At least that is how it is generally translated, but it can also, and perhaps more accurately, be translated as shameless. The neighbor is not just persistent but shameless in his pleading. And Jesus says that it is because of his shamelessness that god/the friend will get up and give him what he needs. What does it mean to pray shamelessly: openly, without abandon, persistently, honestly, without pretense, without trying to get it right or do it properly or impress?

I guess that I would say that I prayed pretty shamelessly during that May, not because anyone told me that was the way to pray but because I was desperate and, frankly, I did not care what anyone thought of me or my prayer: I wept, I prayed, I tried to bargain with God for my father’s life, I Pleaded and begged, I reminded God that I needed my father to be there for my sons, cried till I thought that I would never ever stop crying. I asked friends in a bible study and others in a small group to all pray as well. But by the end of May the oncologist revised his estimate. My father did not have a year, he might make it 2 months. He was going to die and my children would not get to know this man whom I loved so much.

Jesus said:

Ask, and it will be given to 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.

Well, let’s just face the truth: too often our experience would seem to contradict Jesus on this point. Our prayer goes unanswered. The doctor calls with bad news, Our loved ones die or leave, the abuse continues, the violence does not end, the pain does not go away. And we have heard a lot of defenses for God, for Jesus: oh, we do not pray wisely; we do not know what is best for us or we did not pray hard enough; or believe fully enough or say it with the right words; or this one: God has a reason or God has a plan, it was not God’s will; Or God has won the ultimate victory, but that does not mean that evil cannot seem to rule the day in the present

Then, why bother to pray?

Well, I cannot prove it; but as strongly as I believe in God, I do not believe that God has some computer algorithm in heaven that makes decisions for the world based on the words with which we pray or how hard we pray or even how fully we believe that God will answer our prayer. And

I do not believe that God has some master plan in which some folks are made to suffer and others do not, some picked to die young and others achieve old age.

My pleading turned to anger: My father was only 72, his parents had lived to be 88 and 93! Hadn't I answered God's call to attend seminary at no small cost or inconvenience to myself and my family? Wasn't I raising my children in God's church, teaching them God's ways? Didn't God want my sons to know this man that embodied love?

I was making regular trips back and forth between Pittsburgh and Morgantown to be with my parents there and to maintain my home here. Usually the boys went with me, but there was a time (I do not remember why or how) when they were not with me. And as I drove the hour and 15 minutes from my home to the hospital in Morgantown, my anger took voice. I turned up the radio so loud that I could not hear myself think and I screamed and yelled at God. I pounded the steering wheel in retaliatory vengeance and I wept tears of grief and anger.

And then I heard in my head (not some heavenly voice out here somewhere, but it came as a thought that was not my own but in my own head in a very calm voice) "Your sons will know your father through you." And it was over. I did not understand how that could possibly be—I was certainly not my father, but I suddenly felt great peace with my father's eminent death.

All the way through the passage, right up to the very end, Jesus has been talking about bread and petitions and asking and knocking—but then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere we hear: 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!

Now at the very end, it is all about the Holy Spirit. And, of course, it always was.

God desires relationship with us and invites us into prayer and the loving father responds to our imperatives in the form of the Spirit. The spirit which teaches, enlightens, conveys comforts. It is the spirit that helped Jesus endure in the wilderness. It is the spirit that brings us into union with the divine. It is the spirit that guides us to share in the in breaking of the kingdom. It is the spirit that allows us not only to pray but to share in thy will be done. It is the spirit that unites our will with God's so that we actually participate in God's commitment to bring forth God's reign on earth.

Through the spirit we are gifted to see things not as we want them but as they really are—and then the spirit helps us to deal with the truth. But we have to accept the truth for there to be real change. The spirit helps us to accept what we did not think we could bear. And then we can work together to bring about change. The 20th century mystic Thomas Merton said:
In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there.

What is Prayer? Is it magic? A vending machine? Just a pacifier? Eugene Peterson says that *Prayer is the inner working of the relationship that we have with God.* When we let go of trying to master prayer, of trying to have the right technique, prayer awakens us to the presence of the Holy Spirit and we enter into true intimacy with the loving father who wants only good for us.

Why pray? Because in prayer we are invited into an intimate relationship with a loving God who wants to give us life and who works through the Holy Spirit and through us for the good.

My father died July 22. I confess that I do not fully understand prayer. My sons do remember him, not well, but they have heard lots of stories. And Over the years the spirit has led me to find more of my father in myself than I had ever thought and to experience an intimacy with my heavenly father that gives me great peace.

The 20th century Jewish author and professor of Hebrew literature, Aaron Zeitlin says it beautifully in his poem, "If you look at the stars"

*Praise me, says God, and I will know that you love me.
Curse me, says God, and I will know that you love me.
Praise me or curse me
And I will know that you love me.*

*Sing out my graces, says God.
Raise your fist against me and revile, says God.
Sing out graces or revile,
Reviling is also a kind of praise, says God.*

*But if you sit fenced off in your apathy, says God,
If you sit entrenched in: "I don't give a hang," says God,
If you look at the stars and yawn,
If you see suffering and don't cry out,
If you don't praise and you don't revile,
Then I created you in vain, says God.*

Why pray? It is what we are created for.