

Shameless Prayer
Luke 11:1-13
First Presbyterian Hickory
July 28, 2019

You may have heard that Mark Twain used to say
that stopping smoking was the easiest thing in the world.
In fact, he had done it over a hundred times.
Perhaps you can join me in saying the same thing
about our efforts of prayer.
I know how important prayer is...
I know Jesus did it a lot
I know he tells his disciples to do the same.
And I've tried to revitalize my prayer life
at least a hundred times.
Still, I am all too familiar
with what Thomas Kelly says
about his "lapses and failures and returns."
Our scripture passage this morning is about prayer.
And this will be a sermon about prayer.
I try to preach specifically on prayer
at least one Sunday a year...
mainly because I need it,
but I hope it helps you as well.

Luke 11:1-13

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

Sermon

So, let me go ahead and admit
that this and other passages like it
create some difficulty for Christians
when it comes to our expectations of prayer.
Six times in John's Gospel Jesus says:
"Ask and I will give it to you."¹
And then, in our reading this morning...
as Jesus is trying to encourage persistence in prayer...
he says it again: "Ask, and it will be given you;
search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you."
I don't know about you,
but I get real nervous
when Jesus makes sweeping promises like that.
I had a pastoral care professor in seminary
who warned us against offering shallow theological bromides
to the folks in our churches.
"Before you even open your mouth," he said,
think how whatever you are going to say
would sound on the pediatric cancer floor."
And so, I do... today I think about
how Jesus' bold statements on prayer sound
to folks whose prayers seem to go unanswered.
Unanswered prayer,
perhaps more than anything else we face as Christians,
creates a crisis of faith...
with many questions and not so many answers.
So, we wonder, is it Jesus?
Is the Lord just exaggerating to make a point?
Is it God?
Does God really care?
Is God even listening?
Or does God just have bigger fish to fry
than my little life... my little concern?
Or, perhaps more likely we ask: Is it me?
Am I being punished for something?
Am I not saying the right words?

¹ For example: John 14:13-14, 15:7, 15:16, 16:23-24.

Am I not saying them often enough?
Is my faith just not strong enough?

So, if it's OK with you...

let's begin this morning
by admitting Jesus' bold claim about prayer
raises questions in us...
and that despite our best efforts at prayer,
some of our prayers seem to go unanswered.

And then, as we admit we can't explain these things,
let's also agree to try not to feel guilty
simply because we have these questions.

Instead, let's look at scripture
and see what CAN SAY about prayer...
and what convictions we DO HAVE
about this vital practice of our faith.²

**Perhaps our first, and I suppose, fundamental conviction
is that God wants us to pray.**

When we read the Bible...
(and particularly when we try to discern
the overall arc of the Scriptures)...
what we find there
is a God who wants to be in relationship with us.

More than anything else
God wants to be in relationship with us.
I think of when my three daughters were born,
each time I was overwhelmed by how much I loved them.
I couldn't get over how strong my desire was –
even in those first moments of life –
how strong my desire was to love and protect
and provide for them.

I looked forward to a lifetime of relationship –
spending time together...
of talking and listening to each other.

If it is like that with you, Jesus asks,
how much more so is it with God?
God wants us to pray... that's our first conviction.

**The second conviction is that when we pray,
God wants us to ASK.**

² I will offer three convictions which closely follow David Lose's Sunday, July 10, 2010 reflections in his blog post on this passage entitled "Shameless," found at workingpreacher.org.

Of course, prayer is NOT ONLY about asking...
prayer is praise and it's thanksgiving...
it's speaking and it's listening...
it's questioning and it's arguing...
it's confessing and it's lamenting.

But prayer is also... and often... ASKING.
Though we are created in the image of God...
though we have many gifts
and can do many things well,
we are never more than creature –
God is Creator and we are NEVER NOT dependent
upon God's mercy... God's provision...
God's goodness.

And so in prayer, we ask.

For me, that's a hard thing...
I'm not so good at asking God for what I most desire.
I worry about being selfish, so I don't ask.
I hate to be disappointed, so I don't ask.
I think to myself, "I'm not that important."
God has a universe to run, so I don't ask.
Yet, if I'm really honest, I'm also too proud to ask.
I think to myself: "I got this... I can do this."
And then... again being honest with myself...
I'm not so sure I WANT God
to be THAT involved in the details of my life...
that much closeness... that much intimacy...
it makes me nervous. So, I don't ask.
Yet, Jesus clearly wants me – and you – to ask.

But here's where things begin to get more complicated –
for what precisely do we ask?

**Our third conviction from this morning's passage
is that God wants us to ask for anything.**

When his disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray,
he first gives them a model... an example...
we know this model as the Lord's Prayer.
But then, after the model he goes on to talk about
being persistent in prayer...
and the interesting thing is that the word
that many Bibles translate as "persistent"
might actually be better translated as "shameless."
Our petitions to God, Jesus says,
should be bold... audacious... shameless...

asking God for what we most need and desire –
shamelessly.³

Anyone who has spent time around young children
knows how demanding they can be;
how they INSIST and PERSIST
and refuse to be ignored, right?

You barely have time to respond to one request
before there's another one, right?

And that's exactly how we should pray, Jesus says.

Ask and keep on asking.

Seek and keep on seeking.

Knock and keep on knocking thing.

Frankly, I can think of no one other than Jesus
who actually encourages us to be annoying with God.

But he invites us, even commands us,
to be as irritating as a noisy neighbor
who knocks on our door at midnight...
to be as shameless and insistent as a child
in asking for what we desire.

And the promise is that we will receive...
we will find... the door will be opened.

Well, this brings us back to the difficulty this passage presents
for those of us who do pray – “Really, Jesus?”

We have prayed for many things – good things –
and not just for ourselves.

We've prayed for loved ones NOT healed...
relationships NOT restored...
addiction NOT in recovery...
a job NOT offered.

We've prayed for peace in the world
only to awaken to the news that a new war has begun.

My guess is that most of us here this morning
probably have a story about a prayer that was answered.

And yet, for every single answered prayer,
we may have stories of ten others
that seemed to go unanswered.

What are we to think about these prayers?

Again, it's easy to think
that we've not been doing it right,
not praying hard enough,

³ Lose.

not using the right words,
or perhaps that God has enough to do
just holding the planets in their orbits.

OR, it could be that God
may not always give us what we ask for,
but God is always good.

**The question of unanswered prayer
leads to THIS our fourth and final conviction –
God may not always give us what we ask for,
but God is always good.**

You know that short call and response?

“God is good... all the time!
All the time... God is good!”

Well, this is what Jesus is saying
in his odd foray into parenting advice.

“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?”

These are obviously rhetorical questions -
No one would ever give their child
a snake instead of a fish
or a scorpion instead of an egg.”

But notice this is not the same thing
as giving a child exactly what that child asks for.

In your home, when your child asks for a fish,
do you always give him a fish?

No, it may be spaghetti night, right?
He will eat spaghetti like everybody else,
but you will make sure he is well-fed.

Or when your daughter she asks for an egg,
do you immediately scramble one up?

No, she may be allergic to eggs,
so you give her something safer and ultimately better for her.
She WILL BE well fed.⁴

Do you see? Jesus isn't saying ask and seek and knock
and you'll get just what you ask for.

That would assume WE KNOW what is best for us...
and that we know what's best for others for whom we pray.

⁴ From a sermon by my friend Rev. Lynn Williamson, “Lord, Teach Us,” preached September 2, 2001, Shelbyville, KY.

No, what Jesus promises is that when we ask,
 God will always give us something good...
 Jesus said God will give Holy Spirit...
 because God is good.

We know this when we move backward through the text...
 back before these words on parenting...
 back past the parable of the annoyed neighbor...
 back to the prayer Jesus taught his disciples.⁵

Here's where we catch some really good news...
 because this is where Jesus says,
 "When you pray, say, 'Father.'"

Father is not the only name or way we can address God,
 but it is what Jesus calls God here and elsewhere.

When he uses this name,
 he gives us a picture of one
 who is more "fatherly" than our fathers
 and more "motherly" than our mothers.

Here we glimpse a God who loves us
 even more than we can imagine loving our own children...
who loves us enough to give us what we truly need
 rather than what we want.

Here we discover a God
 who has created us in God's image
 and shaped us for godly purpose
 rather than our own cravings.

A pastor was talking about prayer with a friend awhile back...
 this friend was full of questions
 about HOW prayer worked
 and WHETHER it worked...
 and finally, getting a little frustrated, the pastor asked:
 "Do you believe in prayer or don't you?"

He thought for a moment before answering,
 but finally said:
 "I don't know if I believe in prayer,
 but I do believe in the God who listens to my prayers."⁶

Prayer

Holy God, how is it that you could want so much
to be in relationship with us
that you would promise to meet us when we pray?

⁵ See Stephanie Frey in "On God's Case," Christian Century, July 13, 2004, p.17.

⁶ I do not remember where or from who I heard this story.

How is it that you would be so patient
with our questions and doubts...
with our lapses and failures and returns?
And yet, you are patient...
and for that we are eternally thankful.
Cut through our excuses...
break down our defenses...
convince us to ask you – giver of all good gifts –
for what we most need and desire...
for you know our needs even before we ask
and the desires of our hearts are not hidden from you.
We ask this today and everyday
in the name of the One who,
when asked to teach us to pray,
said “When you pray, say: OUR FATHER