

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”
Sermon – Camp Adams Weekend
Smyrna United Church of Christ
July 25, 2010
Katherine Raley

Luke 11:1-13

11:1 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!"

“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples,” Jesus’ disciples requested of him. They had just seen him praying, something they had seen him do regularly. They had also seen him in action, healing people, feeding people, both body and spirit. When they asked him to teach them to pray, maybe they wanted to know what his secret was. Maybe they saw what a difference his praying made in him, and they wanted that power as well. They wanted to experience for themselves that awe-inspiring power that one only receives by communing with God.

“Lord, teach us to pray,” they asked. John’s disciples taught *them* to pray – now we want one. Mark us as your own. Make us *your* disciples, by teaching us *your* prayer. How do we show God that we are His, through you? How do we show the world?

“Lord, teach us to pray.” What should we ask for? How should we ask? What *words* do we use? What ritual? How do we make our petitions to God worthy to be heard? And, Jesus, what do *you* spend so much time on?

“Lord, teach us to pray.” From this question, we receive the prayer that marks us as Christians – that Christians of all denominations can say together. Some, granted, have a different word in the “debts” line than what we use – “Forgive us our debts,” or, “Forgive us our trespasses,” or, “Forgive us our sins.” Sometimes it’s a little awkward when we come to that part in a new church and pause to make sure that we’re saying the right word. The church I worked at this last year used “trespasses,” and I’ve found myself automatically saying that here. Oops! The prayer, though, as a whole, is the same.

This prayer is formalized, ritualized, repeated, and *loved* by almost every Christian church. It is *our* prayer.

And yet, we, as followers of Christ, are still asking, Lord, teach us to pray. Prayer is still a mystery to us in countless ways. It is unscientific, it requires discipline, sometimes it gets us what we want and other times it does not. The Bible tells us to pray – this passage, following the Lord’s prayer, tells us to pray persistently, to never stop asking. It tells us to ask and we shall receive. Our God loves us, surely God will not deny us, just as a loving parent would not deny their child sustaining bread.

But what happens when we pray? If we ask for anything, with faith that we will receive it, does God really give us *everything* that we ask for? And if we *don’t* get it, is it because we don’t have enough faith? Because we don’t believe enough? Do we pray just in order to receive? *Why* do we pray?

I wish I had the answers to these questions for you, and for me. The truth is, though, that I don’t, even with two-thirds of a seminary degree behind me. I won’t have all the answers by the time I graduate, either. I think that it doesn’t matter how much studying one does, prayer will always be somewhat of a mysterious act.

I can tell you, though, some of my thoughts on the subject, and what others have said about it.

I believe that prayer is coming into relationship with God. We pray in order to turn ourselves towards God – God is always there, here with us, but in prayer, we acknowledge that presence and renew our trust in the bond between God and ourselves. When the disciples saw Jesus pray, they saw him reconnecting with God, the one from whom all Christ’s power came. They saw him pray, and then they saw him in action, because his relationship with God in prayer made it possible.

“Prayer is not an old woman’s idle amusement. Properly understood and applied, it is the most potent instrument of action.” ~Mahatma Gandhi

Second, I believe that prayer is an admission that you do not have everything under control. Prayer is turning to God not just for power, but in recognition that *your power* is not enough, that your power must be marked as someone else’s, as God’s. Prayer is acknowledging that God is bigger than any worry and trouble you have, and that God can handle it. Just as the disciples asked Jesus about his prayer so that they could be marked as *his* disciples, we use prayer to mark *us* as Christians, as people dependent on God.

“Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one’s weakness.” ~Mahatma Gandhi

Third, I believe that God listens to each and every prayer, no matter what form, and no matter whether we *hear* God’s answer to it or not. When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, Jesus gave them an answer that included things to ask for. Things like bread – daily sustenance – and to be kept from temptation. In other words, things that would let them be healthy followers of God. We ask God for things too. We ask for things for ourselves, and things for the people we love. We ask for the health and strength of our neighbors in far away places, and for people close to home. God listens to all of this, and God answers us, as our Bible verses say, by sending us the Holy Spirit. God tells us to ask, and the answer will be things that help us to be healthy followers of God, empowered and led by the Spirit.

“I have had prayer answer – most strangely sometimes – but I think our heavenly Father’s loving kindness has been even more evident in what He has refused me.” ~Lewis Carroll

“It is for us to pray not for tasks equal to our powers, but for powers equal to our tasks,

to go forward with a great desire forever beating at the door of our hearts as we travel toward a distant goal.” ~Helen Keller

“Lord, teach us to pray,” Jesus’ disciples asked. We pray because we believe in the power of turning to God and acknowledging that our power is from that connection. We pray to name to God our desires. We pray because we believe in the promises of a loving, powerful God. And in every prayer, we long for the Spirit to answer us, and make us whole. For this we pray, Amen.

- 1) Prayer is communion with God, enabling us for loving action.*
- 2) Prayer is marking us as God’s, as dependent on God’s all-encompassing power.*
- 3) Prayer is always heard by God, and answered by the Holy Spirit, making us whole.*