

The Spirit Driven Church
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
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Text: Luke 11:1-13

NRSV

¹ He [Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of the 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!"

The Sermon

I've titled this sermon "The Spirit Driven Church."

Given the text from Luke, it could have been called "The Prayer Driven Church," but as we know prayer can be used for all sorts of reasons other than a genuine request for the Spirit's leadership in an individual's or a congregation's life, hence the reference to prayer for the Holy Spirit to guide us in our individual and collective prayers.

Reading the Lord's Prayer as Luke's tradition presents it can be a bit jarring, especially with the questions that follow about how humans react to requests, prior to the affirmation that God will surely grant the Holy Spirit to those who request it.

So what is it that makes prayer so significant?

A Lutheran pastor writes that he often begins classes on prayer by asking the following questions:

First, *Why don't people pray, and what might you conclude about a person who feels no need to pray?*

Second, *Why do people pray, and what might you conclude about a person who prays regularly?*

Third – and this question gets to the heart of questions about prayer – *Should a person who claims to be a believer but never prays, be considered a Christian? Why or why not?*

If we were in a Sunday morning class rather than this worship setting, wouldn't it be fascinating to wrestle with those questions?

But we are in worship, and as pastor I'm expected to have a few things to say about a text on Sunday morning, so I'll keep talking for a while, and I trust you'll keep listening, even if some of what is presented may jar you in how you think about prayer that is addressed to the God of Scripture and the God whom Jesus addressed, and not just to some deity out there somewhere.

The message today is simple. It is this:

God wants to hear from us! God wants us to talk back. God wants us to ask individually and collectively to receive the Holy Spirit.

In short, **because God cares about what we think and feel and need, so we need to learn how to talk with God.**

Recently I saw a mother holding her young child. The mother was talking with her little one who, in turn, was staring intently at her mother's lips,. She was also trying to form those same sounds and words her mother had used.

She did pretty well, too, in mimicking some of her mother's sounds, but mostly she just made noise. I knew, however, that in time, if she kept listening and modeling her mother's speech, she would learn how to talk, and not just to talk in general, but to talk intimately to and with her mother.

I wonder about us. I wonder when it comes to prayer as a form of speaking and listening, if we are not often like infants, still needing to learn how to pray. We know some words and sounds, but at times we may feel as though we are just making noise.

Fortunately, just as the little child had her mother, we too have someone to model after in learning how to talk with God, *and that someone is Jesus.*

Jesus' disciples had seen Jesus praying, and the result was that they were so impressed by their Master's intimacy with God that they asked him to teach them to pray like he did.

Wouldn't you and I like to learn that too?

We can, you know, beginning with, "Our Father," or another word of respect from our hearts and traditions for how to address this Mystery we name as *God*.

As Spirit, God isn't masculine or feminine, but in Jesus' Jewish culture it was characteristic to think of God in this manner.

You may wish to use the gender-balanced images of the most recent PC(USA) confession – “A Brief Statement of Faith” – which expresses the conviction that God is “Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, [and] like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home.”

In other words, when you talk with God, imagine that God **is indeed** the loving parent with whom Jesus interacted in such an intimate way. In fact, the word used here for "Father" is "Abba" and could be translated as "Papa", or "Daddy." The image is that of a child climbing onto the lap of a parent and pouring out her or his heart into attentive ears.

To pray "Our Father" reminds us that the transcendent God is there for us, is approachable, and can be trusted to listen.

The image of God as a divine parent and, more specifically, as Divine *Father*, is very meaningful if you had a male parent figure in your life who was loving, appropriately protective, and loved listening to you and interacting with you.

The image of God as Father is not, however, one that is helpful if the very word "Father" brings back bitter memories of abuse and pain.

I could not help but think of such individuals when I read how Jesus asked, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, you give a snake instead? Or asks for an egg, but gives a scorpion?"

Although possibly Jesus couldn't have imagined anyone in his audience saying "Yes!", there are far too many who could answer "yes" in the world that I've been exposed to. My own beloved spouse's biological father was, for example, horribly abusive.

So, to Jesus' question, many would have to honestly answer, "Yes!" There are indeed parents who would give a snake or a scorpion.

Some parents do leave their children with poisonous and painful stings that can stay with them all their lives. Perhaps we would be surprised at how many of us right here today still feel those stings. But, we don't have to remain victims to such memories all our lives.

Take, for example, the approach that Catherine Foote takes in the following prayer from her book, *Survivor Prayers: Talking with God about Childhood Sexual Abuse*.

Daddies hold their babies,
daddies hold them soft.
Strong daddy arms hold babies up
and gentle is the hold.
Daddies laugh with babies,
daddies smile with love.
Warm daddy eyes meet new eyes
and easy is the laugh.
Daddies care for babies,
keep them covered safe.
Big daddy hands reach baby hands
and tender is the care.
Daddies and their babies,
eyes and arms and smiles and love.

Then a daddy hurt a baby
Baby cold with fear,
Baby crying new tears,
Baby frightened, lost.
No more smiles for baby,
No more shelter here.
And God, they call you Daddy,
God, they say you care.
Do you hold your babies?
Do you dry their tears?
Do you match them smile for smile?
Do you shelter safe?
God, that daddy stole your name.
God, that daddy made me mad.
God, I want a daddy back
(daddies hold their babies).
God, please daddy me.

So, should there be abusive memories of a figure called *Father* for you to think of God as one, picture God as the most loving person you have ever known in your life, the one you trust completely and who you know is always there for you. For that is truly who God is.

"OUR Father..." is how Jesus instructed his early and his contemporary disciples to pray. Note that Jesus doesn't advise them to pray "My Father." but rather "Our Father."

I think he is teaching us to have other persons in addition to ourselves on our hearts, minds and lips. We are not to pray to God the Father thinking of ourselves as an *only* child. To the contrary, we have many brothers and sisters who are precious and as loved by the Father as we are.

Like any truly loving parent, God wants us, God's children, to love one another, to get along with one another. That's very very important to God, for our relationships with each other are vital to our own well being.

Several years back one of our special friends, Gerrie Lindaman, died.

One of her adult children shared that on one occasion some time earlier, when her now-adult children asked her what she *truly* wanted from them on a special occasion, their mother replied "**Just love each other. That's the best possible gift you can give me.**"

So our talking with God should include what we know of the joys and sorrows of the other members of our family. We are to bring *their needs* before God, but not at the neglect of bringing *our own needs* as well.

And this also means praying for the power to forgive others. Jesus teaches us in this prayer, "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive those indebted to us."

I often image "wholeness" as taking place when we are firmly grounded in ourselves, with one hand reaching *up* to take the hand of God and the other reaching *out* to take the hand of a neighbor.

Jesus knows that all relationships get strained and experience some brokenness. The truth of the matter is that we all wound one another from time to time and, unfortunately some of the deepest wounds we give -- and receive -- come from the ones we profess and covenant to love the most.

But let's be honest, there are those persons who seem to be out to get us, who have decided to be our enemies, who do everything they can to hurt us.

Now, here's the tough part. When we pray, we should bring those hostile to us before God, just as we bring those we love and who are loving before God. Jesus challenges us in this prayer and, indeed, most of the biblical record challenges us to ask for God's help to forgive our enemies and not just our friends.

Prayer may, indeed be the only medicine that can begin to heal our wounded relationships. A few years back the *Spokesman-Review* showed a striking picture. It was of a tall young man in his 20's, standing beside a beautiful young woman of about the same age. She, however, was in a wheel chair, paralyzed from the waist down.

And the reason she was paralyzed was that a bullet from this young man's gun had gone through the wall of his apartment, and on into her apartment where she was asleep in her bed. The bullet penetrated her spine.

She is now married to someone other than the one whose behavior with a weapon -- an action that transpired when he was drunk -- had put her in the wheelchair.

But she also knew that even if her body might never heal, the only chance for her mind and soul to heal was to reconcile with the middle-of-the-night shooter. So, they met, and at least at the time of the article, they were meeting regularly to support each other. *That's the kind of reconciliation Jesus challenges us to seek.*

And, even if our attempts to reconcile do not change the other person, they ultimately change us. Such intercession through prayer and, when possible, face-to-face, it help to ease the bitterness and hurt. We may never forget, but we can forgive!

"Our Father..." In these two simple words we have just about all we need to know about talking with God.

Martin Luther apparently was not only a Reformer but also a mystic. Listen to his thoughts upon the words, "Our Father."

Frequently when I came to a certain part of 'Our Father' or to a petition, I land in such rich thoughts that I leave behind all set prayers. When such rich, good thoughts arrive, then one should leave the other commandments aside and offer room to those thoughts and listen in stillness and for all the world not put up obstructions. For then the Holy Spirit . . . is preaching and one word from [that] sermon is better than a thousand of our prayers. I have often learned more from such prayer than I could have received from much reading and writing.

But let's listen to some of the other words on the lips of Jesus as he teaches us about prayer.

"Thy kingdom come"

When we talk with God, it should not just be to tell God what we want, but also to ask what God wants for us and to then submit ourselves to God's will.

I imagine that every one of us probably went to someone recently to get some advice on something. We do this all the time, because we do not know everything, or sometimes we just need to talk it through with someone even when we are pretty sure we have it figured out for ourselves.

But the reality is that we are limited, every last one of us. We don't each have all the truth all the time. And, if we really trust the one who is giving the advice, chances are we will follow that advice. We would be foolish to do otherwise if we know that person knows much more about it than we do.

Well, my friends, prayer is going to God constantly for advice, seeking insight, seeking direction. What wiser, better advisor can we have than God? And we can know that somehow, some way, God will direct us, will show us the right way. And when God shows the way, it is wise to follow it, even if we do not understand it or agree with it. Granted, we have to be careful we don't simply substitute our wish list and claim that God is the author.

Jesus, once again, is our model for this. Remember how he comes to the Garden of Gethsemane and begins to pray, "Father, let this cup pass from me..."? He openly shared what he desired with God - that this path not be taken if some other would do as well, for that path led to the cross. But Jesus ended his prayer with, "Never-the-less, thy will, not mine, be done." We have truly learned how to pray when we pray like that and really mean it!

How should we pray?

"Give us this day our daily bread," Jesus tells us.

When we pray, it's okay to bring our needs, concerns and desires to God, trusting that God will provide. Like a loving parent, God knows our needs and stands ready to meet them. God also, like a parent, does not ignore our desires, our wishes, but listens and grants them if they are within God's will for us.

How should we pray?

"Forgive us our sins," Jesus tells us to pray.

When your hands get soiled, what do you do? Wash them. Chances are you have to wash them several times a day.

When we pray, part of our prayers should be lifting up our soiled hands to God, not trying to hide them, but openly showing them, and seeking the cleansing of God's grace and forgiveness. This means we are to be honest in our prayers, naming the sins we have committed that we know about, declaring with specificity before God what we feel we have done wrong or the right we have neglected to do. Yes, God knows already, so it's not like we have to inform God for God's benefit. We do it for our benefit.

Until we are specific and honest about our sins, they remain ignored and hidden from us, creating distance between us, God, and others. But when we name them through prayer, we begin to face them, we begin to take responsibility, and begin to move beyond them as we accept God's forgiveness.

But there is something else I hear in this passage about how we should pray.

Jesus is telling us here that we should never give up in our prayers. Persevere, like the man in the parable who had unexpected guests arrived at his house but he isn't prepared. So he goes to a friend's house at midnight and asks for bread and he has to keep on persisting to get that bread, even from his friend.

Now the point is not that we have to pester God until we get what we want. To the contrary, if through persistence we can get something from a friend that he's unwilling to give, how much more can we get what we need from God who is always ready, willing and able to give! But we have to make the effort!

We have to knock on the door and not give up after one little rap. The reason why many of us never really find the joy of answered prayer is that we give up too quickly.

God is not a short order cook! We need to keep on praying, even though we seem to get no answer, but trusting that God will answer in God's own good time and way. Besides, often what we need most is not what we may ask for, but the Who we are reconnected with when we pray. For the best thing we receive in prayer is what we need the most - a wondrous intimacy with God.

I ask you to bow your heads and close your eyes for a moment. I am going to lead you through a guided meditation based on what we have learned this morning. I encourage you to at least periodically use some exercise such as this to assist you as you pray.

Who is the most loving, caring person you have ever known in your life? Imagine that person is God sitting right down beside you.

Let the face of a brother or sister come to mind...Call that person by name to God...Ask for God's blessings on him or her right now.

Let the face of a person who has hurt you come to mind...Call that name out to God...Ask God to help you forgive that person.

You have very much needed God's guidance on some decision and situation in your life...Tell God right now...Ask to know the will of God for you concerning it.

What is the daily bread that you need God to give right now?.. Ask God for it.

Silently name the sin right now in your life that you feel you most need to confess to God...Confess it...Ask God to forgive you.

I am going to close by singing a song a friend shared with me. The song uses the prayer of Jesus but with the tune to Kum Ba Yah (Words By James Seddon).

Father God in heaven, Lord most high: hear your children's prayer, Lord most high: hallowed be your name, Lord most high - O Lord, hear our prayer.

May your kingdom come here on earth; may your will be done here on earth, as it is in heaven so on earth - O Lord, hear our prayer.

Give us daily bread day by day, and forgive our sins day by day, as we too forgive day by day - O Lord, hear our prayer.

Lead us in your way, make us strong; when temptations come, make us strong; save us from all sin, keep us strong - O Lord, hear our prayer.

All things come from you, all are yours - kingdom, glory, power, all are yours; take our lives and gifts, all are yours - O Lord, hear our prayer.

If we, individually and collectively, are willing to pray in these ways, I can assure you, we will be part of an ever more Spirit driven church.

Thanks be to God, Amen.