

Teach Us to Pray
Psalm 25; Luke 11:1-13
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One day, we're told, Jesus was off praying by himself, as he often does in Luke's gospel, and after he'd finished, one of his disciples approached him and said, "Lord, teach us to pray." And you have to wonder, why is this follower asking this now? Do the disciples not know how to pray? Had they just been watching Jesus pray and saw something dramatic happening that they didn't experience when they prayed? Or maybe they'd noticed as they followed him around day after day that his prayers seemed more powerful, more effective than theirs? That he got results that they didn't? Or maybe they were getting a reputation themselves as religious folks and when they went to parishioners' houses for dinner they were being asked to pray and they were embarrassed to say, "Sorry, I don't know how." Are they thinking, like a lot of us, that there must be some special formula, some secret combination you need when you pray?

All we know is that Jesus answered by saying, "When you pray, say this: And then he recited a very simple, 5 sentence prayer that we've come to know as the Lord's Prayer. You might have noticed that the version I read seems shorter and simpler than the one you probably learned. This is Luke's version, and for whatever reason, is leaner, more concise. But even if we looked at the one recorded in Matthew's gospel, we see that it really is a very simple prayer and that it's a communal prayer. It's all about US and God, not ME and God. It's about relationships, with God and with one another.

The first word, "Father" affirms the kind of relationship that we have with God. This is not some unknown God; this is someone whom Jesus suggests we approach as a loving parent. Jesus even uses the word Abba that is more like Daddy than Father. So God is approachable and lovable. But God isn't so familiar that we can approach God like just anyone we know. God's name, God's being is hallowed, is holy other. As a prayer in the UCC worship book goes, God "is as close as our next breath and as distant as the farthest star." The paradox of transcendence and immanence, of intimacy and holiness, of familiarity and mystery.

Jesus' prayer moves pretty quickly from that opening to some basics of life: Daily bread—enough to eat today. Relationship—forgiveness for what we've done wrong, how we've hurt others and help forgiving people who've hurt us. Safety—bring us through the times of trial, the hard times which are part of every human life. The end. That's it. No fancy conclusion. No glory and power, no praying in Jesus' name. Not even an Amen. Just 5 short sentences.

But then Jesus goes on to amplify his answer with two parables or illustrations. One is about a neighbor. (And remember Jesus just taught us about neighbors a couple of weeks ago in the parable of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10. A neighbor is someone who shows compassion...even to strangers, enemies, and friends who knock on your door incessantly in the middle of the night.) Even a tired neighbor will eventually open the door and give their friend what they need. The other illustration is about parents and children. A good parent, maybe even a mediocre parent, will give a child food when they ask for it. So, the bottom line message is that if that's the way imperfect human beings act, how do you think God will respond when

you ask, search, and knock on the door? Is God at least as faithful, dependable, responsible and gracious as your friend, your parent, your next door neighbor? Let's hope so, right?

I think ultimately what Jesus is trying to explain to his disciples is that prayer itself isn't that hard if you have a good, trusting relationship with God. You'll notice that when the disciples asks Jesus to teach them to pray, he doesn't talk about the mechanics of prayer. He doesn't say, here's how, when, why, and where you should pray. He doesn't say you need to kneel or stand up or bow your head. He doesn't say, "You have to include Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication." Instead he provides them with a very simple prayer that covers the essentials of human living, and then he invites his listeners to think about Who they're praying to. Is God like the neighbor who needs to be roused from sleep and shamed into answering the friend's request? Is God like a parent who gives scorpions and snakes when children ask for eggs and fish? Or is God someone much more gracious and generous and trustworthy?

In a brief podcast about this passage from Luke, three professors from Lutheran Seminary suggest that what Jesus is doing with these illustrations is revealing his relationship with God, and indirectly asking his listeners, like you and me, "Who do you imagine or expect God to be when you're praying?" If you were to write down your prayers and then read them back what would they reveal about your relationship to God? For example, do you picture God as a vindictive judge, someone who's knows all the rules and is keeping track of who breaks them in order to punish us? Do you think God is all-controlling or all-powerful, and kind of passive-aggressive? "I won't give you what you need unless you use the right words or pray often enough?" Is God like an exact change vending machine? You can see that can of soda you're longing for, but you only have \$20 bills, not the right combination of coins? Or do you assume God is like a loving parent who listens carefully not only to the words you say but the feelings and needs behind the words? Someone who wants to give you good gifts, even the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's own self, to comfort and guide you? Is God someone you can trust enough to share your greatest hopes and needs and fears and joys?

"Teach us to pray," the disciples said to Jesus.

David Lose, one of those seminary professors, says Jesus' answer to that request can be summarized with three bullet points:

- First, prayer doesn't have to be long or complex to be faithful.
- Second, faithful prayer is honest. Prayer isn't about saying the right words or sounding particularly pious or eloquent. It's about saying what's on our heart about what we need in our own way with our own words.
- Third, prayer is based on trust. Jesus says that just as we want to give good gifts to the people we love, so God wants even more to give us, God's own children, every good gift. "Because we trust this is true, we pray."

That's it: prayer is simple, honest, and offered in trust. That's something each of us can do. We don't really need to be taught. We don't need a degree in theology or ministry. But, Lose goes on, what we all need to perfect anything we learn to do is practice.

So here's what we're going to do for 3 or 4 minutes now. We're going to practice. When I stop talking, I want each of you to turn to someone near you. It can be the person you came here with, or a perfect stranger. For a minute or so, I invite you to share with the other person (or 2) a "high" and a "low" of your past week, in 30 seconds or less. Then I want you to pray for each other. You can hold hands, you can pray aloud, you can pray silently. But remember: prayer is simple, it's honest, and it's based on trust. Then close by reciting aloud whatever version of the Lord's Prayer you know best. When the room gets quiet, we'll sing "What a friend we have in Jesus."