Sermon July 27, 2019; Year C, Proper 12; Luke 11:1-13

In today’s text from the Gospel of Luke the disciples ask Jesus how to pray. The Bible has a lot of instruction about how to pray and yet most of us have questions about the practice of prayer. I Thessalonians says to “pray without ceasing.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says, “Don’t heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

We got in a conversation in our last book study about praying daily. Is God more likely to answer a prayer if you pray it every day? I hope so. We’re praying for Preston, his treatments and his health every day. You have heavy things in your life that you pray for. The heaviest burdens are the ones we pray about most often. And I think that has two benefits—it puts hope in God’s ability to move our mountains and it also helps our anxiety to lift those things up to God.

But what’s the best way to ask? That’s what the disciples want to know. And Jesus’s answer is pretty spare, but he tells a story along with this model prayer. And it’s about one friend asking another friend for help.

Now, as you probably know, the culture of Jesus’ day is one that, like the South, places a high value on hospitality. If a friend is in need and asks for help in Jesus’ day, it brings a certain amount of shame on the friend who doesn’t come through. Honor and Shame are cultural pillars of that day and time.

If Jesus had asked his neighbor, “Hey, can I borrow your lawn mower?” It would have been shameful for the neighbor to just say, “You know, I just don’t loan it out. Sorry.” Just as it would be somewhat shameful today. And we would probably call that guy a jerk later.

As we hear today’s scripture text from Luke 11:1-13, think about how we ask God for help. Jesus teaches us to ask of God as people who are in relationship. The very first word of the prayer is “Father.” Then Jesus gives us this example of a man asking a favor of a friend. The man asks and asks and asks, with almost ***shameless*** persistence. Listen for the Word of the Lord from the Gospel of Luke:

[Jesus] 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 that verb means “Ask and ask and ask and ask”] 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!"

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord; **thanks be to God.**

Back in Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus is introducing the Lord’s Prayer, he says, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, [says Jesus] for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Again, Jesus says, it’s about relationship. It’s as if Jesus is saying, “Just go ask him!” This kind of request assumes relationship. Tight relationship. And with tight relationships, steadfast love level relationships, you don’t have to blow sunshine.

One thing is for sure, Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer certainly does model spare wording and doesn’t heap up empty phrases. 38 words. It’s so short, and direct and to the point it seems almost rude to us. The petitions are almost like commands, instead of requests. “Give us this day….Forgive us….and do not bring us to the time of trial.” It’s almost like saying to your neighbor, “Give me your lawnmower.”

Such an abrupt request—most of us wouldn’t even use that style of ask with our families. But I think that’s maybe the point. Though family is hopefully a good, tight relationship, our relationship with God is even tighter. At least from God’s perspective it is. If it’s not, then that’s on us. You know the old phrase, “If you feel far from God, guess who moved?” Yeah.

Jesus says, “Just go ask him!” The father knows what you need before you ask him. The father knows what you need; the Son knows how hard it is to be human. The Son has lived and died and knows the desperation of the human condition.

I saw a picture this week in the news, maybe you saw it too. It was video of a man in Syria whose home had been bombed by Russia. He was reaching from the part of the building that was still standing, down into the pile of rubble that had collapsed around him.

His maybe 8-year-old daughter was buried in the rubble up to her neck. She was trying to reach his infant daughter just an arms’ length away, and the infant was dangling from the debris by the smallest corner of her shirt. Dangling in midair. She looked like a doll, covered in dust and debris. It was the most desperate picture. And the man is trying to shift the rubble to get to them. And then we hear later that the older daughter died, but somehow, miraculously, the infant survived.

The desperation of the human condition requires, even demands prayer. This life, even for those of us who don’t live in war-torn regions, is full of hardships and loss. God has given us prayer as our strength. The kind of prayer that cuts straight to it. As the author Ann Lamott says, she has two basic prayers, "Thank you, thank you," and "Help me, help me, help me."[[4]](#footnote-4) That’s the kind of prayer Jesus is teaching us—the kind that we can even say on the run.

Douglas John Hall says that the direct manner of this prayer makes its own point. “prayer is not a meek, contrived, and merely "religious" act; it is the act of human beings who know how hard it is to be human. Real prayer cannot be faked. Its only prerequisites are ….to recognize the depths of our need, and [to have] enough humility to ask for help.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Thank God we have a father like that. Waiting with the expectancy of the father of the prodigal son. He’s standing ready, scanning the horizon to look for us, running towards us, before we even start to ask. God on tiptoes. God on tiptoes, anxious to be the Provider, the Comforter, the Wisdom-Giver, the Guide. God the Father, whose only desire is that we come first to him. To ask. To seek. To knock. And to find. Thanks be to God for that! Amen and Amen.

1. I Thessalonians 5:17, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 6:7, NRSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 6:7-8, NRSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Qtd. in Wallace, James A. “Homiletical Perspective.” Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hall, Douglas John. “Pastoral Perspective.” Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)