

Sermon for Nov. 6, 2016 – “The Way to Pray”

32th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Luke 11:1-13

Two men were shipwrecked on a deserted island. Frustrated and nearly at the end of his rope began to pray: “Dear Lord, I know that I haven’t been a very good person. In the past I’ve lied, cheated, and hurt people with my behavior. I drink, smoke, swear and gamble. But God, if you get us out of this mess, I promise that you’ll see a changed man. I’ll...” At this point his friend shouted, “Hold it. You don’t need to say another word. I see a boat and it’s headed our way.”

It’s interesting how some people view prayer. I think there are lots of people, Christians included, who view prayer like these two men. The first guy turned to God in prayer only as a last resort. If there were other options available, he probably would’ve considered them first. It’s only when he’s in a desperate situation, or when he’s run out of options, does he turn to God for help. The content of his prayer, the words he uses, reveals that he’s praying to God in a **conditional** way. If God will rescue them from the mess they’re in, he’ll promise God that he’ll do certain things and/or make certain changes in his life. This method of praying is really bargaining with God...If you do this, God, then I’ll do such and such. However, in most cases, such prayers aren’t likely to change God. We simply cannot manipulate God to get what we want, no matter how badly we want it, or think we need it.

We cannot fool God. God knows the deepest thoughts and motivations of our hearts, souls and minds. Such conditional, bargaining prayers are rarely sincere, because when the crisis is over and all is well again, people have a tendency to forget all about what they’d promised God, if they don’t forget God altogether. In the case of the second guy, the one who stopped his friend from praying any further, maybe he was skeptical that his friend could keep promises to God, maybe he didn’t want his friend to stop living a sinful lifestyle, or maybe he had more faith in himself and other human beings to get them out of their mess than he did in God. At any rate, I think there are times when all of us are tempted to pray conditional prayers. We try to bargain with God when we pray. We think (incorrectly) that if we just sound sincere enough, needy enough, or if we phrase our prayers the right way, then we can manipulate God in order to get what we want. Or perhaps like the second guy, at times we abandon prayer altogether. Thinking incorrectly that we don’t need God and that we don’t need to pray. Instead, we can do everything on our own or we can rely on other human beings to get what we want.

I must confess that our reading today is personally challenging. Sometimes I feel that I come to God in prayer as if I were a kid sitting on Santa’s lap telling him what I want for Christmas. How about you? I suspect that lots of times, we get our priorities mixed up. Too often, we think of God as a spiritual vending machine. We pray for what we **want** rather than what we truly **need**.

Yet, I remind myself that even Jesus and the apostle Paul could get it wrong in their prayers by mixing up wants and needs. You might remember in the garden of Gethsemane that Jesus prayed that the cup of suffering and death be taken away from Him. Soon after, he prayed the best prayer of all...“Not my will, but thy will be done.” Paul had prayed that the Lord would remove his “thorn in the flesh.” For both Jesus and Paul – the answer was “no!” God wouldn’t remove it. Rather, that God’s power was made known through weakness.

At the same time, in today's gospel reading, one of the most important messages Jesus teaches is to be persistent in praying: **“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find,” He tells His disciples – “Knock, and the door will be opened for you.”** Of course, that means everyone, not a small chosen minority. Jesus makes that pretty clear with what He says next. He says: **“Everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”** As wonderful and full of promise as these words are I think that they've been misunderstood and misinterpreted by lots of folks over the years. And, I don't believe that Jesus is offering anyone a blank check here. He's NOT promising to give us anything or everything we pray for. He doesn't mean that if you pray to win the lottery you will, or that if you pray for a raise, or a bigger house or car, and pray in just the right way that you'll get what you pray for. Sorry, this is NOT what Jesus is saying at all. (Despite what these “prosperity gospel” preachers say). I believe that such prayers are wrong and potentially harmful, I've seen it happen!

Persistent prayer doesn't work when it honors our own prejudices and frustrations, but when, and **only** when, it yields and seeks the mind, heart, spirit, and will of God. For that reason, what Jesus is saying here is very promising. He invites everyone to ask, search, and knock. No one's left out here. The invitation to open to you, me, all people. The implication here is that everyone who asks, searches, and knocks is answered. The answer may be: “yes,” “no,” or “wait”. The answer might be “you're asking for the wrong things...” “You're searching in the wrong places...” Or “You're knocking on the wrong doors”. Such answers are all necessary. What's more, they're the best for us at the time given the nature of our prayers and the circumstances in which we offer them. And, sinners that we are, most likely we don't always get it right when we pray, thus Jesus' instruction to be persistent in praying – keep asking, keep searching, keep knocking.

In fact, ultimately what's most important for us isn't necessarily that we get what we ask for or find what we're looking for, or whether or not the door we're knocking on opens to us. These are important to be sure, but not the **most** important. And, if we're worried about praying “correctly”, we're missing the point of prayer. Prayer is not about finding the right words. Prayer is, first and foremost, about relationship building. It's about what's in our hearts and what's on our minds. It's about slowing down long enough and to allow ourselves to be open and vulnerable enough to let God in.

I think that what's ultimately most important is that we discover an intimacy with our Lord through persistence in prayer. We come to realize that it's about our relationship with Christ. It's about basking in and valuing that relationship more than **anything** or **anyone** in the world. Prayer is being known by and knowing our God of love as **our** Father, **our** Messiah and **our** Holy Spirit. Besides, as I said earlier, God knows the deepest thoughts and motivations of our hearts, souls and minds. It's what Paul meant when he wrote these words to the church in Rome: **“And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit...Because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”**

In the intimacy of prayer, we not only commune with God the Creator of the universe, we also bear our deepest secrets to Jesus our most trustworthy friend and brother. We're graced with the presence of the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin and reassures us of the promise that we're forgiven. With this gift of intimacy through persistent prayer, God sometimes gives us the spiritual hug we need when we're lonely or feel rejected, sometimes it's the joy by simply being alive, or the courage required to deal with a situation or problem at home, on the job, or in school. Another way of stating it is that through intimacy with God, we come to recognize/acknowledge that it isn't about what we **don't** have, but in what we've **already** been given.

Jesus speaks about this intimacy of prayer with him by comparing it with bad parents providing for the needs of their children. Even the worst parent is smart enough to give their kids the right gifts when they ask. “Seriously,” Jesus says, “who gives their kid a snake when they ask for a fish, or a scorpion when they ask for an egg?” Duh! “So how much more will your heavenly Father, the perfect parent, give to those who ask Him?” In other words, we’re not told that we need to be persistent in prayer because God’s hard of hearing. Or because God needs to be nagged or pestered – no! Rather, it’s because he wants an intimate relationship with each and every one of us. He wants us to know **Him** as He knows **us**. It’s because when we pray, our prayers carry weight. In the Letter of James, we read: **“The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”** The question then is: Is that how you’d define your prayer life, powerful and effective? I ask that because, and here’s the thing, prayer’s not a passive act on our part...It’s an aggressive, active ministry. Prayer, James says, has force and produces results. Prayer impacts lives and situations on the earth. **True** prayer works. When we pray, we’re putting our shoulder to the wheel and moving the forces of heaven.

However, we must be willing to do our part. We must work to the extent we can, to achieve what we prayed for. And through the gift of the Holy Spirit we’ll not only have the strength and courage to do that, we’ll also come to trust in God as we ask, search and knock. We’ll know that whatever God gives us by way of answering our prayers, it’s **all** and **always** for the best.

How does Jesus teach his disciples to pray? Boldly. Courageously. Expectantly. Relentlessly. We must seek God. We must praise God. We must thank God. We must stand strong. We must lift our heads and raise our voices.

Make no mistake...Ours is a strong God ready to hear us, ready to answer us. Therefore, brothers and sisters, when we pray let us pray for our world, for our community, for our church, for one another. That God’s will to be done! That’s what Jesus taught. That’s the way to pray!

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Almighty and Loving God, may Your will be done here on earth, may we follow You closely and serve You faithfully.

Purify our thoughts and intentions so that we will only ask for the basics and fundamentals in life.

Give us good health of mind, body and spirit so that we can continue with our journey towards You.

Give us our daily bread and forgive our trespasses so that in Your loving mercy we may live a holy life.

This we ask through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You, and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

Amen and amen.