

Sermon for July 28, 2019 – “Start Praying”
17th Sunday in OT, Year C – Texts: Luke 11:1-13
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A little boy wanted a bicycle. He had been taught in Sunday school that he should probably pray for one, but he did not know how best to go about it. So, as he was watching a church television program, a very traditional service. He saw how the minister prayed. At the end of the day the lad got on his knees and said “Lord, if it is in Your Sovereign will and in Your Eternal plan that I can get myself a bicycle in Your time and according to Your will, would You please get me a bicycle? In Jesus name I pray. Amen.” Two days later, there was still no bicycle, so he began to think he needed a different prayer. He turned on the television again and watched a service where the prosperity gospel was preached and saw how that minister had prayed. And at the end of the day, he got on his knees and said, “Lord, I declare my need for a bicycle! And I declare that it will be a nice blue-colored bicycle and delivered to my home within 24 hours. I lay claim to it, Amen!” After several days, he still hadn’t a bicycle. As he was walking down the hall, he saw a statue of the Virgin Mary in his parents’ room on one of the shelves. He took the statue off of the shelf, runs back to his room, puts it in the closet and locks the door. Later that night as he got ready for bed the little boy got down on his knees and said, “Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again...”

I wonder, how do we pray? For every prayer that’s offered around the world these days there must be an equal amount of opinions and ideas, rules of thumb and conventions that tell us how prayer works. Lots of ideas. Some good. Some bad. Some that contain more than a little wishful thinking. Ask, seek, knock. Ask and keep asking. Seek and keep seeking. Knock and keep knocking. Pray boldly and you will receive. You need more faith to pray. You need to pray more. You need to pray for God’s will. You didn’t pray enough, and you were punished with illness, suffering or death. Prayer brings us closer to God. Prayer doesn’t do anything. Prayer’s for us, so that we know our needs. God hears the prayers of holy people more, especially pastors (which isn’t true!). God hears all prayers. God only gives us what we need. God will give you what you ask for. There are three answers to prayer, yes, no and maybe later. Or, yes, no and wait. Prayer is like meditation. God speaks to us in prayer. You have to pray from the heart. You need to pray with words that have been prayed by the faithful for centuries.

See what I mean? There are lots of different ways to think about prayer. Let’s see if we can untangle this a bit. Prayer, I think we all agree, is a key aspect of Christian life. We pray together each Sunday. We pray alone. We pray aloud. We pray in silence. We pray for many things; for rain and sunshine, for justice and peace, for those who are ill, those who are grieving and in distress. And still, for many reasons, prayer can be a very frustrating aspect of Christian life. We want to know the “hows”, the “whens”, and the “whys.” Prayer carries with it such expectation that it has the power to make things happen and yet we’ve prayed for and with those for whom prayers have **not** been answered. We’ve all had prayers that aren’t answered. And I imagine that it causes us to wonder sometime if prayer is of any use, and perhaps more painfully, whether or not God hears us.

The disciples ask Jesus how to pray. And He gives them a mouthful. He said to them, “When you pray say, “Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” It sounds familiar, but not quite. Of course it’s what we call the “Lord’s Prayer” but not quite the one we remember and are going to pray a bit later. There’s no earthly will of God mentioned in Luke’s version but it’s an earthy sort of prayer that gives us a foundation. A firm foundation certainly. Given by our Lord, hence the name the Lord’s Prayer, and it has grounded Christians for 2,000 years. Daily bread. Forgiveness of sins. Salvation from trial and temptation. This prayer is so engrained in us that we pray it without needing to think, like breathing. It becomes part of the most basic aspects of our living. It’s a prayer that goes with us through life from beginning to end. A prayer offered every week during worship. A prayer offered at baptisms and at funerals. Yet, I wonder...Do you think that the disciples were hoping for a prayer like this? I doubt it. I bet they wanted one of the cool ones like Jesus would pray. When Jesus would look to heaven say something to His Father and bread and fish would multiply, or dead children would be raised, or demons would scatter, or the sick, blind and lame would be healed, or when a man who’d been a corpse for four days would rise up from a sealed tomb.

The disciples, 70 of them, had been sent out by Jesus. He sent them out in pairs to every town and place where He Himself intended to go. The disciples had been healing and casting out demons in Jesus name. Yet, like us, they probably wanted to control such power not for it just to happen without really knowing why or how. They want to know the trick, the formula to prayer. Can we be honest for a moment and admit that we want the same thing? That we want prayer to be like rubbing a magic lantern or waving a magic wand? We want prayer to give us wealth and happiness. We want prayer that will save us from harm, heal everyone who’s sick, comfort those who are grieving and so on. Don’t we? At the very least we want prayer and its effects to be something we can measure simply and easily. But it isn’t, and you all know as well as I do that Jesus doesn’t do simple and easy.

Now, it occurred to me recently that with every tragedy we hear about we hear people, usually politicians or leaders of some sort, stand up and offer their “thoughts and prayers” for victims and their families. I do it. We all do it. But do we do it every time? I wonder. I mean, I wonder if it’s not becoming something of an empty phrase, something we say when we don’t know what else to say, when we don’t know what else to do. Now, on the other hand, you might say, “Wait a minute, Jeff, I actually do think about others and I actually do pray for people.” That’s awesome! Really! Still every time there’s yet another horrendous act of violence or a devastating natural disaster thoughts and prayers abound but nothing seems to change. It makes us wonder if all this prayer is having any effect. It makes us wonder if there’s any point to prayer at all. When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, it may seem like they are looking for some angle on power, on the ability to get stuff from God. They might be looking for what so many TV prosperity gospel preachers are offering. But they might also be more like us and how we feel about prayer. They might be asking Jesus how to pray because for them prayer feels empty and powerless. And so Jesus offers them a place to start, a beginning. Jesus give the disciples instructions not on how to achieve great things in prayer, but a place to start, a way to begin. Daily Bread. Forgiveness. Salvation from Trial. God’s Kingdom come.

Jesus shows them that prayer doesn’t so much achieve the results as it begins the process. Praying for daily bread doesn’t feed anyone who’s hungry. Praying for forgiveness doesn’t reconcile anyone.

Praying for salvation from times of trial doesn't alleviate anyone's pain and suffering. Praying **begins** those things. Prayer is the starting place. To put it another way let me ask, what would it look like if we didn't pray? What would happen if we didn't pray for the church, the world and those in need? How many homeless people would find new homes if we didn't pray for them week after week? How many congregations would run food banks, serve at soup kitchens or offer meal programs if we didn't pray for the hungry week after week? The truth is that we don't really know! Yet, we most definitely know churches, para-religious organizations, and people of faith, in general have been the primary feet on the ground for feeding, clothing, sheltering, etc., to those who Jesus called the "least of these" for hundreds of years!

Okay, then, how about this; would we be able to offer forgiveness if we didn't pray that God would help us forgive? Again, we don't really know! Yet, as we ask for forgiveness God shows us how to offer forgiveness. God gives us the wherewithal to forgive, or at the very least, provide us with opportunities to forgive. Where would we turn in times of trial if we didn't pray that God would save us week after week? We don't know. Yet, as we pray that God would deliver us God reminds us that we don't face the trials of our world on our own but together as the Body of Christ. Prayer is the beginning. In prayer God reveals to us all the places where His Kingdom comes into world. In prayer, when we pray for daily bread, for forgiveness, for salvation from time of trial. We see that God's Kingdom is breaking into the world with food for the hungry, with mercy and forgiveness for sinners like us, with salvation for those suffering under the shadow of death. But even more than that, God gives us a way in prayer to speak about the needs of the world. God gives us a way to speak about the hungry, the poor, the suffering, the dying, without it sounding like a depressing news report.

It seems to me, brothers and sisters, and here's the thing, that prayer is in large part about perspective and about revelation. Prayer allows us to see where God is already at work meeting the needs of the world and God gives us words to express this reality in prayer. Prayer is a starting place when we so often treat it like the end point, or as we talked about just a few weeks ago, a last resort. Prayer helps us to see where God is at work in the world, where God's Kingdom is coming. Prayer helps give us the language to talk about our needs in an honest way. It helps us to confront the needs of the world without being overwhelmed and depressed as we do when we're watching or reading the news. And so when we wonder with the disciples about whether prayer has any meaning or purpose, Jesus shows us that prayer is the starting place. The starting place to see God in our world. It's been said that "The Lord's Prayer brings the whole of life, into the presence of God and brings the whole of God, into the whole of life."

When another politician or leader or Facebook post offers "thoughts and prayers" for something and we wonder if that does anything to help Jesus shows us how to begin in prayer. He shows us how to begin with daily bread, forgiveness and salvation from trial. Jesus reveals to us that in prayer God's Kingdom is already on its way.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.