

## **Praying Lessons**

A Sermon for Every Sunday, July 28, 2019  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
*Luke 11:1-13*

At the beginning of today's Gospel reading Luke tells us that "Jesus was praying in a certain place." As I read that verse over and over again last week I was struck by the obvious truth that Jesus prayed. He prayed all the time. He prayed wherever he went. He prayed even when he was making his way "resolutely" toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Which makes me think that if we are going to be good and faithful followers of Jesus we, too, must learn to pray.

I saw the results of a survey recently which suggested that very few Protestant ministers are satisfied with their personal prayer lives. Out of 860 Protestant church pastors surveyed only 16 percent were very satisfied with their personal prayer life. 47 percent were somewhat satisfied, 30 percent were somewhat dissatisfied, and 7 percent were very dissatisfied.<sup>i</sup> It may be like that for everyone, but we ministers are supposed to be professionals when it comes to prayer, aren't we? Isn't that why people always ask us to say the blessing at meals? If the professional pray-ers aren't satisfied with their performance what chance do the amateurs have? So, two years ago, I decided to do something about my personal prayer life.

I had fallen into a routine where I got up to make the coffee in the morning and then, while it was brewing, went into the living room, got down on my knees, and said my prayers. When the coffee was done so was I. I might do some Bible study while I had coffee, post something on my blog, reach out to an old friend, but I wasn't really praying except for those few minutes. I knew I could do better. So I started going to be

an hour earlier at night, giving up that last television show, and getting up an hour earlier in the morning, so I could say my prayers. At first I thought an hour would be way too long. But I started using *A Guide to Prayer*, published by the Upper Room, and it helped. For every day there was an invocation, a Psalm, a daily Scripture reading, some readings for reflection, prayers for the church, myself, and others, a time for written reflection, a hymn, and finally a benediction. An hour was barely enough. When someone asked me about my new practice a few months later I said, “It’s changing my life!” And all I really needed was a decision, some discipline, and a guide to prayer.

Which is what the disciples were looking for in today’s reading.

“Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples,” they said. And Jesus was glad to oblige. He said, “When you pray say this…” and he taught them something we have come to call the Lord’s Prayer. Now, Luke’s version is simpler than Matthew’s. Matthew’s is the one we usually recite to “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Luke’s version simply says:

*Father,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come.  
Give us each day our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.  
And lead us not into temptation.*

We call it the Lord’s Prayer but it’s actually the Disciples’ Prayer, isn’t it? It was for them. And it was short enough and simple enough that they could have written it down on a 3x5 card and carried it around in their back pockets. When Jesus stopped to pray they could have pulled it out and recited it. But let’s take a closer look at what this prayer asks for, and it’s really only five things:

1. The first is that the Father's name would be "hallowed," that it would be made holy, and in these days maybe all we are asking for is that people would stop dragging God's name through the mud, that they would stop taking it in vain, that they would stop using it as a curse word. We pray for that time when everyone will speak God's name in hushed and reverent tones and relate to him as a loving heavenly father.
2. The second request is that God's kingdom would come. In his commentary on this passage Alan Culpepper says, "The preaching of the kingdom of God has been the driving purpose of Jesus' ministry, and there have been hints of its imminence."<sup>iii</sup> Jesus wants his disciples to pray it on in and, I believe, to roll up their sleeves and *work* to make it so.
3. The third request is for daily bread—not a mansion, or a yacht, or a Rolls Royce, but for bread—the staff of life. And if it's true that Jesus wants his disciples to work to bring in the kingdom, then it is also true that they will need their strength to do it; they will need their daily bread.
4. The fourth request is for the forgiveness of sins, "for we also forgive everyone who sins against us," Jesus adds. Jesus did, apparently, but some of us don't. We need to be free of our own sins but we also need to give up our grudges against others. They weigh us down. They keep us from doing the work of the kingdom.
5. Finally we ask not to be led into temptation, from a Greek word that can also mean *testing* or *trial*. "Don't bring us into a time of testing," we pray. "Don't let us be put on trial." But if we are, let us prove ourselves worthy of your name.

In his comments on this passage David Lose says, “The Lord’s Prayer is pretty simple. After asking that we act in a way to keep God’s name holy and live the kingdom life on earth, Jesus’ prayer covers *sustenance* (in the form of daily bread), *relationship* (in the form of forgiveness), and *safety* (bringing us through the time of trial). These are the basics of life, and Jesus limits himself pretty much to these essentials. In short, prayer doesn’t need to be complex to be faithful.”<sup>iii</sup>

But we have been faithfully praying that prayer for some 2,000 years now, and God’s kingdom still hasn’t come. I think that’s the other reason we don’t pray as we should: it’s not only that we don’t know how, it’s that we don’t believe it works, at least not for us, not in the way we want it to. We get discouraged when God doesn’t answer our prayers, and sometimes we just stop praying. But Jesus says, “No! Never give up!” and he offers two good examples and one strong exhortation to keep us praying.

In the first example, Jesus talks about a man who needs bread at midnight. He doesn’t know where to go; all the stores are closed. So he goes to his friend’s house and says, “Help! I’ve got this unexpected guest and I don’t have anything to feed him. I need bread. Have you got any?” That’s simple, right? Honest? But the man is also persistent; even though his friend tells him to go away he keeps knocking on the door and asking for bread until his friend finally gets up and gives him some. Jesus says, “Even if he won’t get up because he’s his friend, he will get up because of your *shameless audacity*.” And so I say to you: ask for what you need and keep on asking.

Jesus follows that example with an exhortation. “Ask,” he says, “and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the

door will be opened.” And then, to illustrate his point, he gives one more example: “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?” he says. “Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Because it may be the Spirit, more than anything else, that inspires us to keep on asking even when we have almost given up hope.

“So, remember,” Jesus says, “This is not a friend you are asking for bread, it’s a father; and it’s not just any father, it’s your heavenly father! If you who are evil know how to give good gifts, HOW MUCH MORE will your father give you what you need.” Alan Culpepper says it’s that first word, “Father,” that makes the rest of the Lord’s Prayer possible. In Aramaic it’s *abba*, which means something more like “Papa.” “Papa, will you give me the food I need for today? Papa will you forgive me if I make a mistake? Papa, will you keep me from getting into trouble?” “How could a father say no to requests like that?” Jesus might ask, “And if that’s true for earthly fathers, then HOW MUCH MORE is it true for your heavenly father!”

I know that’s hard for some of you to believe. You haven’t had very loving earthly fathers and so you find it hard to trust your heavenly father. I am truly sorry that that has been your experience. But it hasn’t been mine. Twelve years ago I wrote up a collection of seventy things I remembered about my dad in honor of his seventieth birthday and I saved this one for the very end. It’s a memory from 1979, when I was twenty years old, taking a semester off from college to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life and looking for some guidance. It goes like this:

“I had come home for a visit from that farm in West Virginia where I had been working. I was planning to go back to St. Andrews College in the fall, but Mom didn’t think that was a good idea. She was trying to talk me out of it and I was trying to talk her into it and we had worn each other out with our reasons. I finally climbed the ladder to the loft to get some sleep, exhausted in more ways than one. And then, sometime in the night I got up to look at the fingernail I had pinched in a log splitter on the farm a few weeks earlier. It had turned black almost immediately, and then in the last few days it had gotten loose, and as I tugged at it that night in the bathroom it came off completely, revealing a red, grotesquely wrinkled nail bed. I stared at it in horror, and finally went back up to the loft imagining that it would always look that way, that friends and family members would shun me, and that I wouldn’t get to go back to St. Andrews, and that I would have to work on that awful farm forever . . . and in a blubbing fit of adolescent self-pity I cried myself to sleep.

“Early the next morning Dad came creeping up the ladder to that loft. He was going somewhere and wouldn’t be back by the time I left for the farm. He had come to say goodbye. And as he knelt beside my mattress there on the floor I started to cry again, and poured out all my fears and frustration. I told him about my long, hard talk with Mom. I told him how lonely I was on the farm. And finally, between sobs, I showed him my finger. ‘Is it always going to look that way?’ I asked. He took my hand in his hands and looked at my finger in the early morning light. ‘The nail bed looks healthy and pink,’ he said, finally. ‘I don’t see any sign of infection. I think it will be just fine.’ And then he did something he hadn’t done in a long, long time. He leaned down and kissed me on the forehead.

“I was twenty years old, a junior in college, but in that moment I felt like a little boy again, and my big, strong daddy was right there with me, and because of that everything was going to be all right.

“And, because of that, everything has been—always.”

I know. Not everyone has a father like that. But I think Jesus would say that if even one earthly father can care for his child like that, then HOW MUCH MORE can your Heavenly Father care for you?

—*Jim Somerville, 2019*

---

<sup>i</sup> From the *Baptist Press* website, June 6, 2005

<sup>ii</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 234.

<sup>iii</sup> David Lose (from the *Working Preacher* website, July 22, 2013)