

Scripture Lesson: Luke 11:1-13

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 67-68

¹ 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 So 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, '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 out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. ⁹ "So I say to you: ask, and it will be given to 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 asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asked for an egg, would 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."

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!**Special Music:** *"The Lord's Prayer – Kathleen Jimenez, Soloist**by Albert Malotte***Luke 11:1-13****07/27/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.****Ask; Search; Knock****Rev. Amy Terhune**

If you have ever worked in customer service, you have probably had to deal with all different kinds of people. One woman who works for the US Postal Service tells about an irate customer who stormed into the post office one afternoon and pounded her fist on the counter angrily. Hoping to disarm any hostility, the postal worker took a deep breath, offered a friendly smile, and asked calmly, "How can I help you, ma'am?"

"I went out this morning," the customer began angrily, "and when I came home, I found a card saying the mailman tried to deliver a package, but no one was home. I'll have you know, my husband was in all morning! He never heard a thing!"

After apologizing, the postal employee got the woman's parcel.

On seeing the return address, the woman gushed. "Oh good! We've been waiting for this for ages!"

Timidly, the postal worker said, "If you don't mind my asking, what is it?"

The woman said with pride, "My husband's new hearing aid." [from "The Perfect Prayer" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Ah! We don't always listen well, and we don't always hear what we need or want to hear, do we? But there is one who always listens; always hears; is always present to us. Our subject this morning is prayer, and whenever I think about prayer, my mind immediately draws on a scene from the movie *Shadowlands*, where Anthony Hopkins plays the beloved Christian Author CS Lewis, who was probably most well-known for *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. *Shadowlands* tells the story of the relationship between Lewis and his wife Joy Gresham, who was already dying of cancer when they

married. In one scene, C.S. Lewis comes breathless and hurriedly into the chapel after having been to see his wife at the hospital in London. He is, presumably, going to assist in the service that's about to take place. His friend, the curate of the parish, asks after his wife and Lewis responds that she's a little better today.

His friend is pleased. "You see! God has heard your prayer and is answering it."

And C.S. Lewis offers an interesting response. He says, "That's not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time. It doesn't change God. It changes me."

That scene has stuck with me all these decades because it resonates with me. I find my experience of prayer much the same. Prayer changes me.

In our gospel lesson today, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. They do so, not because they're facing hard times or because they need strength or wisdom, but because they watch Jesus pray and they see the power it has in Jesus' life. They saw what it did for Jesus, how it anchored him, how it buoyed him, how it empowered him. I don't think Jesus ever meant to give us a standard set of words to use. I think he meant to give us a blueprint for how to understand prayer and have it be meaningful. This is not to say that the Lord's Prayer can't be deeply meaningful, especially given that it has connected Christians of every culture and creed across 20 centuries, but let's explore this from the premise of finding meaning in prayer generally, not just this prayer.

The first key to meaningful prayer is found in the very first word Jesus uses as he instructs them. When you pray say this: Father. The Greek here is 'Abba', which actually means something more like "pa" or "daddy". It's a term of endearment. But more importantly, it's a term that defines a relationship. Abba. I am not suggesting here that Father is the only way God may be known relationally. Not at all. For some, the term 'father' brings out nothing but nightmarish memories and brokenness, and the church is finally beginning to acknowledge that reality. My point here is not to become mired in a discussion of inclusive language. Rather, it is to suggest that we learn from Jesus here. Meaningful prayer is a relationship.

I once had a professor who used to tell us that there was no wrong way to pray. With all due respect, I disagree. Please don't misunderstand. We don't have to be eloquent. God doesn't judge our Grammar or our choice of adjectives. There isn't a correct posture or a correct stance. But there are health and unhealthy attitudes. If we come at prayer with the idea that it's God's customer service department and all we have to do is place an order and wait for its arrival, we'll be disappointed. Prayer isn't about what we get. It's about relationship. It's about knowing God deep within. By all means, lift those you love in prayer – those dying of cancer, those longing for a child, those struggling with the repercussions of bad choices, those suffering. But always be aware of the difference between wanting God, and wanting God to do something.

A meaningful prayer life begins with an understanding that God desires to know and be known within our souls. Look at how Jesus says things. Abba, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Before he ever says a word about his own needs, he acknowledges God's holiness and sets his sights on God's kingdom—God's plans for our world. He places himself in the context of God's work. Then, and only then, does he ask anything. Do you see that? He's halfway done with the prayer before he gets to himself?

And what does he ask for? Give us each day our daily bread. This is a reference to his people's own history – the Exodus from Egypt, when God sends Manna daily. Why? Because they'd been slaves in Egypt, living with a slave mentality that hoarded a good thing when they came across it because you never know when you'd get more again. So God's task with the ancient Israelites was to teach them to trust God for what they needed day by day – to not take more than they needed, to not hoard, to not

live in a state of constant anxiety. Jesus wants us to learn that trust, to let go the impulse to be greedy. And the prayer is for OUR daily bread – not MY daily bread – the idea being that providing for the basic needs of all people is part of our prayer, our faith, our work as part of building God's Kingdom among us. We've already said prayer is relational. But not just with God. It relates us to one another, too.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard people tell me to feed myself, take care of myself, see to my own needs, because I won't be able to help anyone else if I don't. An empty cup has nothing to give. And I get that. There's a pragmatism to that line of thinking that helps us set healthy boundaries. But Jesus doesn't talk in terms of me and mine or you and yours. He talks about us and ours. When are we going to understand that we are all connected, that humankind belongs to one another, and that all thrive when we think and act and understand ourselves to be we, us, together one? I don't know when humankind will learn to see beyond selfishness and greed, but I remain convicted with everything that is in me that understanding me as part of we is the difference between death and life.

The next line makes that clear. Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. Remember how the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray after they witness prayer's power in his life? Never underestimate the power of prayer. When we ask to be forgiven, we acknowledge our place in relation to God. We acknowledge God's power to redeem, to renew, to resurrect and give life. We acknowledge God's redeeming love for us; God's justifying grace. Never forget that God's power lies not in manipulation or control. God's power is love. Love is the most powerful force in the world. So when we pray to forgive others, we channel God's love and grace through ourselves to others around us. We are empowered. We become extensions of God's power to love and forgive.

And the final line is a plea to not bring us to the time of trial. Let me clear here. God does not lead us into temptation. God does not purposefully set us up to be tested or tried. But life in a fallen world does. And Jesus seems to know that. We're going to face trials, temptations, suffering, difficulty. God may not orchestrate such things, but God can use such things, which is a subtle difference, I know, but it's good news for those going through rough patches. God didn't do this to you, but God may be found in it and our relationship with God can either be strengthened or severed based on our willingness to trust God and cling to faith when it all hits the fan. When faced with trials or temptations, we pray in those moments to make the right choices in life. In other words, we ask for God's way to take precedence in our lives. For Jesus, it was all about relating his life to God's life. Relationship.

Some proof for this is found in nine verses that follow. These verses tell us, not what to say, but what to think about prayer—how to understand prayer. So there's a parable about a certain man who awakens a neighbor begging help in providing hospitality to an unexpected guest. If we take this parable too realistically, it would not be unreasonable to assume that we are the man knocking and God is the neighbor inside who helps us only begrudgingly and to get rid of us. But of course, that's not Jesus' point at all. We're not meant to read it that literally.

What we're meant to take away is the word 'persistence'. Jesus holds up persistence as crucial to prayer because it is. Prayer is a discipline like anything else. Not long ago, I was here working one night and Bryan was practicing, and I heard him play the same few measures of music about 80 times, trying to reinforce the correct fingering, the rhythm, the flow of it. In that moment, there was no joy of music. That was the raw, nitty-gritty, work of discipline. Why does he do it? Because he knows it will get him to a place where he can let the music flow out of him. Prayer is much the same. I would be lying if I told you that every day my prayers are momentous, life-changing, awe-inspiring events. I can probably count on one hand the number of times prayer has been like that. Most of the time, it's simple and uneventful. Sometimes, every noise, every light, every movement is distracting. Sometimes I get up from prayer wondering if anything happened at all. But when I need to draw on that strength, it's there, you see.

So Jesus tells us to ask, search, and knock. Why? To ask is to seek information, to make a request, to look for or require something. One can ask for something. One can ask something of another. One can ask who, what, when, where, why, how. But asking always a question that needs an answer. It is always an acknowledgement that the one asking does not have everything they need—be that physical needs, spiritual discernment or intellectual information—to take another step. To ask is to acknowledge our need.

Next, we are told to search. Like asking, searching involves a quest for information, but is not necessarily able to articulated in a simple question. Searching involves something deeper—a process of discovery. To search is to cover a lot of ground as one examines and tests their experiences. Searching nearly always involves an unknown conclusion. We search when something is lost. We search when things are unfamiliar. We search when we can't see beyond the bend in the road. We search when there are gaps in our wisdom and understanding. To search is to acknowledge our limits.

Finally, we're told to knock. Unlike asking or searching, knocking is not an intellectual exercise. You knock on a door to gain admittance. Knocking is what we do when we want to get in out of the rain or the snow or the baking heat. Knocking is what we do when we go to call on a friend. Knocking gets us inside—to safety, warmth, nourishment, fellowship. To knock is to find shelter. To knock is to find a welcome. To knock is to not be alone.

Do you see where I'm going with this? Our needs, our limits, our hunger for companionship. God, I need this. God, I can't do this. God, I'm so scared; I'm so alone. These are what first drive most of us to pray. And Jesus knows. He's felt it. He'll feel it the last night of his earthly life, won't he? But he's learned how to hear God. So he holds up persistence in the face of the obstacles that tear at the frayed edges of our faith knowing that God will meet us in the fray. That if we ask, seek, knock, we will receive the companionship of the Holy Spirit, who comforts, but also convicts; who inspires but also inspects; who leads but also pushes; who goads us but also gifts us with incredible opportunities.

One final note: Prayer is not a last resort. When we bow our heads in collective prayer, God hears, God listens, God knows our hearts, our brokenness, our sin, our needs, our dreams. God knows when we hunger, not for God to do something, but for God to be in our lives. Prayer is where things start, and it's risky, my friends. Prayer is an act of submission and surrender, but it's also where the winds of the Holy Spirit begin to stir and the power of God sources our dreams and our work. I love what Annie Dillard wrote about prayer and the Holy Spirit nearly half a century ago.

"Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The church is like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness for ladies to wear a straw hat and white gloves to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews!" [adapted from Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.]

This is the power of prayer. And it changes us. So, shall we pray...

Come, Holy Spirit. Move in us, move in our church, move in Saginaw. We know that the church of tomorrow does not look like anything we've seen before. Help us be open to what you're preparing, inspired to work together, uplifted by love, committed to justice. Expand our belief in what is possible. Give us faith in spite of our fears and courage that endures. Overcome the polarization that mars us. Help us see beyond institutions and systems, and focus on being co-builders of your Kingdom among us here and now, until that day comes when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world send up the song that once the angels sang. Amen.