

## What's a Prayer?

Proper 12C: Luke 11.1-13

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Even if you're not a preacher, I'm guessing that on a Sunday or two, as you sat listening attentively to the lessons that were being read, you may have wondered which one of them the preacher was going to preach on. I say this realizing that, at least when I'm scheduled to be in the pulpit, that may have been the moment when your interest in the sermon reached its peak.

Maybe you were on the edge of your pew just this morning. What's it going to be, Scott? St. Paul's "spiritual circumcision." Or maybe the Hebrew prophet who marries a prostitute, not because he loves her, but as a living metaphor for the unfaithful people of Israel. Wouldn't you like to have been a fly on the wall for those premarital counseling sessions? Or will it be the Lord's Prayer. Would you think I'm a coward if I said, "Um ... Let's go with the Lord's Prayer"? Well, so be it.

I didn't bother to google it, but the Lord's Prayer has got to be on the short list for, if it's not the clear winner of The Most Prayed Prayer of All Time, don't you think? I've prayed it with children and I've prayed it in the alley behind Calvary with people waiting for a little breakfast and maybe a pair of pants. I've looked up from the altar to see couples take each other's hand as we pray it at Communion, maybe as a reminder of their weddings, which is another place I've heard the prayer prayed dozens and dozens of times. And I've seen it on the lips of people in the last moments of their lives. Seemingly emptied of all the other words they've known, as if they were so much earthly ballast by then, among the last to remain were, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

Those are just a few of the places this preacher has heard and prayed the Lord's Prayer. Can you add these to all the times you've heard it and prayed it and multiply those prayers upon many more multiples, across centuries and oceans, through countless languages and cultures and get an inkling of the vastness of the prayer Jesus turned loose into the world when he answered a simple question with a simple prayer one afternoon in Palestine two thousand years ago?

But there's a problem that Jesus's astonishing success in getting people to pray his prayer may make only worse. Think about it for a minute. In Luke's telling of the story, Jesus doesn't just tell his disciples what to pray, he tells them to ask and to search and to knock because everyone who does, gets what they asked and searched and knocked for in their prayers. Well, wait a minute. Anybody here ever said the Lord's Prayer? Anybody here ever prayed for something they didn't get? What gives? And does this make the Lord's Prayer the biggest failure in the history of prayer, given the number of times it was voiced and people's lives went on lacking the things they'd come to God for?

Maybe we don't get off so easily, as we try to make sense of Jesus's teaching on the nature and the practice of prayer.

Versions of the Lord's Prayer appear in both Matthew and in Luke. As you probably noticed, we get the Reader's Digest Condensed version in Luke. Over in Matthew, the more familiar version appears in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus tells his listeners not to heap up empty phrases in their prayers, like the Gentiles do. Pray like this, he says.

In Luke, it's a different scene. An unnamed disciple asks Jesus to teach them how to pray. And Jesus responds with the prayer. But he goes on with a story. He says imagine a friend whose door you're banging on at midnight because you need three loaves of the daily bread he's just said we should pray for. The friend, who we're pretty sure is the God character here, doesn't say, "Of course!" He says, "Are you kidding me? Do you know what time it is?" And then Jesus says that even though this guy won't give you bread at midnight just because you're a friend, if you keep on pestering him long enough, he'll get up and give you what you need. How's that for an edifying image of God?

Then Jesus says the bit about everyone getting what they ask for. Everyone. He says everyone finds what they seek and the doors always open to those who knock on them. And then he says, "Oh, and don't worry. God's not the kind of God who gives snakes and scorpions to children." Which is a pretty low bar for decency, don't you think? Especially for our heavenly Father with the hallowed name. Again, what gives?

Actually, is it too late to change my mind and go back to that sermon I was starting to write on Hosea and the biblical view of marriage?

Well, to make sense of all this, we might need to go back to the original request. Do you remember it? "Lord, teach us to pray." The disciple didn't ask about what God was like. The request was for help down on the human end of praying. How do we do it? What should we say or expect to happen? What kind of acceptance or persistence or reverence or whatever should we be trying to cultivate in ourselves as we pray?

And this changes things, doesn't it? It does for me. Because maybe we are the central subject of Jesus's teaching on prayer, not God. Jesus wasn't trying to convince us that God is like a grumpy sleeper who finds our prayers so annoying he answers them just to make us stop. He was telling us to pray with the passion and the persistence of the one banging his fist on the neighbor's door at midnight. He wants whatever was alive in that guy to be alive in us. He wants that to be alive in our prayers.

Which actually makes a lot of sense in the gospel of Luke. Think of how many times Jesus marvels at the faith of a Gentile or tells a woman he seems to have healed that her faith is what made her well, or tells another that her faith has actually saved her. Time and again it's that spark of something he sees in people, especially people in the worst of circumstances, people to whom the world seems to have given nothing but snakes and scorpions, that he keeps pointing us to. "Do you see it?!" he says. "There it is again, in her." Or, when it's absent in us, he says, "You faithless and perverse generation. You have everything you need but still can't see it. How much longer must I bear with you?"

When we stop asking how to get God to give us what we want when we pray and begin to wonder what Jesus wants to come alive in us through the practice of prayer I think we start seeing what Jesus was talking about in lives all around us, even as this broken down world seems to be breaking down only further by the day.

On Thursday, Ardelle and I were sitting on the couch, talking about the aforementioned broken-down-ness and unjustness of this world, especially for those who have the least, when Ardelle got a text from our friend Evelyn back in Arkansas. I could go on and on about the beautiful soul that is Evelyn. Suffice it to say she is gentle, joyful, and wise. She's also been in recovery for years from a serious drug and alcohol addiction, and she raised two beautiful humans, now in their 20s, in the meantime.

Evelyn is also Black, and she is a woman, and she is not rich. I have no doubt in the least that those last three things contributed to the fact that a year ago, after her second hip replacement,

Evelyn suffered debilitating pain for months before a doctor finally believed her that something had gone wrong with the surgery and ordered a bone scan. Her hip was both badly infected and displaced.

Well, Evelyn is not a person of means, as I said. And Ardelle had encouraged her to reach out to an attorney friend in Little Rock for help. Her text on Thursday said the lawyer our friend had referred her to said she had a case but he couldn't take it right now. And Ardelle started to weep for her friend Evelyn and for this world that seems to care so little about her pain.

But — and I'm not sure I've ever quoted a text message in a sermon before — here is what Evelyn sent back after Ardelle said that she loved her. "I love you too, always. I was disappointed but not broken. It was worth another try ... I may never know, but it's been said karma is a [word I can't say in a sermon]." But then she said this. "I cannot say what kind of heart [that doctor] has, but it seems like he didn't care about what was happening to me. If that was so he will reap what he sows. I sure thought of the wrongs I had done in my life ... But what you gonna do? Stay prayed up and be the best person you can be and always keep in mind God is still in control. That's my mantra nowadays anyway."

"Ok," Ardelle replied. "Well, I'm going to turn to your mantra in the coming days!"

"Believe it! Believe it! Believe it!" Evelyn typed right back. And even as I typed this out to tell to you, it felt like Jesus was taking me by the shoulders yet again and wrenching me around to say, "There it is! Do you see the Holy Spirit in that woman? All I've ever wanted from all the prayers you've ever prayed is for a little more of what burns in her to burn a little more brightly in you."

Once upon a time there was a man who heard a knock at his door at midnight. Visitors had arrived, and he had no bread. So he went to a friend's house and began to bang on the door for three loaves to set before them. This man, he wouldn't be satisfied until he'd gotten what he needed to extend hospitality to the strangers in his house. So he knocked and he knocked and he knocked into the night. What is prayer? "It's him," Jesus says. "It's her. It's that generous, persistent, hopeful, hospitable and holy spirit that this whole round world of closed doors and cruel indifference will never snuff entirely out. That, my friends ... That is prayer."