

The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost: Luke 11.1-13

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The Rev. Scott Walters

I need to let you know that I no longer subscribe to the New Yorker. Once upon a time I think this would be a fireable offense for an Episcopal priest. But I let the subscription go after watching an episode of "The Good Place." If you don't know the show, Ted Danson plays a pleasant demon named Michael who wears crisp suits and bright bow ties. And when he goes rogue and behaves decently, his boss, a senior demon named Shawn, sentences him to spend the rest of eternity in an empty room with nothing but a stack of New Yorker magazines for entertainment.

"Oh, come on!" Michael says. "You know I'll never read all those!" To which the sinister Shawn replies, "I know. And they're just gonna keep...on...coming!" As another issue drops from nowhere onto the pile.

The joke struck a little too close to home. So I let the subscription expire.

I will miss the cartoons. Although even my taste in those probably just confirms I'm not highbrow enough to be counted among the subscribed.

I mean, one of my all time favorites is of two guys who are walking along a sidewalk, one of whom looks like a very large potato. And the potato guy says to the normal guy, "Man, if you're ever granted three wishes, do not blow them all on a giant potato body with tiny arms and legs." Okay. It's better on the page.

But I offer it here for your edification (if not your entertainment) because it is a cartoon about wanting the wrong things, isn't it? And having our wants out of whack has been part of the human condition for a very long time.

A philosopher and theologian named James K. A. Smith once wrote a book titled "You Are What you Love." And the very first line is, "What do you want?"

The book is based on the premise that we're actually a lot more like the guy in the cartoon than we're willing to admit. Maybe we think we want a subscription to a sophisticated magazine. But do we? How many times have we chosen something we think will make us happy and end up — if not exactly turning into a potato with tiny arms and legs — feeling empty or lonely or unfulfilled in that deeper part of ourselves where our true desires must live?

Well, when we start to see that sometimes what we want isn't leading us into the full and abundant life Jesus keeps offering, we might begin to ask if what we want can change.

Sometimes prayer is understood as a way of getting out of whatever your vision of an eternal torment might be. Sometimes prayer is understood as getting God to give us what we want. But Jesus seems to tell one curious disciple that prayer can be a way to change what we want.

In the eleventh chapter of Luke, someone says to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." And, kind of uncharacteristically, Jesus says, "Okay. Here's what to say when you pray."

What follows is a short version of what we've come to call The Lord's Prayer. A short version of the prayer Christians have kept on praying across the centuries because that's what Jesus told us to say.

But then Jesus tells that little parable about a person who, for some reason, thinks he needs three loaves of bread in the middle of the night (bread being something Jesus has just told us to pray for, remember?). So he knocks on a friend's door until the friend is annoyed enough to get out of bed and hand over the bread so this persistent nuisance will go away.

On the surface, it's not the most flattering image of God or the person who prays, is it? And when Jesus continues with, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and

the door will be opened...” the takeaway seems to be that prayer really is a way of getting what you want. You’ll get what you ask for. You just need to be insufferable enough for God to begrudgingly give in and let you have it.

But I don’t think this is what Jesus meant. And I think we have to take the whole passage together to get at its difficult, but ultimately very good news.

Remember how Jesus’s response began? It began with the prayer itself. And each line of the prayer expresses a want. A desire that Jesus asks us to ask for, even if we don’t want it quite yet.

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.

The prayer begins with the honoring of God’s name as holy. I don’t know about you, but if someone asks me what I want, the first thing to come to mind is not that God’s name be honored. And I’ve been to seminary! But this is the desire Jesus tells us to pray for first.

And then he says to ask for God’s kingdom — not my opinion about how things should be, but God’s — he says to ask for God’s kingdom to come. He says learn to pray that what God wants, not what I want, comes to be.

Finally, in line three, I get to pray for something for myself. But it’s for bread. Daily bread. Ordinary sustenance. “Ask God for that,” Jesus says.

But guess what, folks. I’ve already got some bread. I bought a loaf of Dave’s Killer Bread with 21 Whole Grains & Seeds that I keep in the break room fridge right next to the peanut butter and jelly I also purchased with my very own hard earned money.

Now that I mention it in front of you, it occurs to me that my hard earned money used to be your hard earned money until you decided to tithe it. So, I’m going to go off script, Jesus, to say thank you. Thank you, Calvary, for my daily bread. Even if that’s not part of the Lord’s Prayer.

But none of that’s what Jesus told me to pray about. He said offer up that most basic desire for ordinary sustenance to God in your prayer.

He then tells us to ask for forgiveness. Which I think I want. But, honestly, I’m really good at self-justification. So a lot of days my shortcomings, obvious as they may be to you, don’t tug too hard on my conscience. But, yeah, I’ll take some forgiveness. But does it really have to entail forgiving every single person who owes me anything at all? According to Jesus, apparently so. “Desire a realm in which forgiveness is the rule,” may be what he’s teaching our hearts to want.

Jesus tells us to finish up our prayer with a request not to be brought to the time of trial. This one I’m down with. Don’t make my life too hard, dear God. I like that prayer... Even if it didn’t seem to work out that way for the same Jesus who is teaching us these words. Still, it’s what he says to ask for. He tells us it’s okay to want those times of trial not to come.

This is the shape of a prayer Jesus tells us to pray fervently, even when we think God has fallen asleep. It’s the prayer he tells us to ask, search, and knock with and for. And when we do, he promises that we will get whatever it is we want.

How? Maybe because prayer is a means by which our wants can change into something closer to what God wants, over time. Maybe that’s how Jesus says we can have what we want. Learn to want what God wants.

I realize this can sound like one more reason to feel bad about yourself. One more reason for each of us to think we’re off track, not just in what we think and what we do, but off track way down in our desires. But we are. We are all a little off track in what we want, aren’t we?

In fact, hearing that we all desire things that don’t lead to life and that Jesus offers this prayer to all of us to transform those desires is the beginning of the good news. It’s like when I turn down the antacids aisle in the pharmacy and see the 9,000 brightly colored options from which to choose. Apparently I’m not the only one who carries his stress in his stomach. I still need the medicine. But it’s a kind of a relief just to see it’s not so strange that I do.

Something similar is true of the gospel. Which must be why the Lord's Prayer is printed in Bibles and prayer books, on billboards and bumper stickers, in every language on earth for all sorts and conditions of people to pray. And all sorts and conditions are praying it. All the time. Because the need to have our desires become more aligned with the desires of God for this world is universal. It includes us all, and we all need the prayer Jesus taught us to pray.

So. What do you want? Really. What do you really want? Or what do you want to want?

If this is a community of Jesus's followers, and I think that it is, you should be able to ask such things truthfully here. You should sense a safety, a grace, an expansiveness in this place, because we're all praying in the same direction. We're all praying our lives toward the prayer Jesus taught us. Praying together for our wants to be changed a little more into the likeness of God's desires for this world. And maybe, by grace, to see those divine desires come a little more fully into view. Maybe a few of them even through the imperfect prayers of an obnoxiously persistent lot like us.