

Luke 11:1-13
Binding Agent
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
8-19-18

Once again, it is so good to be back. I have been looking forward to this day for many weeks now. As a church, who is led by the Holy Spirit, you have invited us into your lives to speak to you each week about what Jesus says. To imagine with you how this Kingdom of God is present and alive all around us, if we are willing to look for it. And most importantly of all to teach about and reveal a life of prayer.

So, I have to admit, it's a little odd when the roles are reversed. But this is what has happened in the last few weeks. Amy and I had a front row seat with which to see just how chaotic and uncertain life can make us feel. And it was you as our community, who assumed the role of speaking to us about God, it was you who held us up in prayer and what we have felt is just what the Apostle James writes when he says the prayers of righteous avialeth much.

In many ways for the last few months you allowed me, to set aside the role of pastor, so that I could give my full attention and strength to the role of loving and serving my wife. It is the most important and worthy responsibility any one of us can assume. Jesus says: **Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends** (John 15:12).

While we were there I had a lot of time to sit and think and reflect. Lord, you have been so kind to us in so many ways, too many to count. And yet Lord, Amy is facing something I know I don't fully comprehend, and I feel pretty helpless to do much about it. But yet Lord your word says that you are a strong tower, that those who put their hope in God will mount up on wings like eagles. Lord, here we are in this place, by what is certainly your sheer grace alone, and these medical professionals are talking about cures. But the Lord says in Exodus 15:26 **I am the Lord your healer**. And Lord, back home there are people, loving people, who are caring for our children and family, watching our dog, cutting our grass, watering the flowers, sending cards, and making meals, praying over us, declaring that the Lord is our strength and our song, he has become our salvation and we will live and not die and declare the works of the Lord in the land of the living. It is so much more than I can comprehend.

What are we supposed to do with all of it? How can we ever fully comprehend what has just taken place, and how the Lord holds it all together?

Do these questions sound familiar? Are they questions perhaps you've asked in pivotal moments? Let's look at another pivotal moment.

Now Jesus^[a] was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread,^[b]

⁴ and forgive us our sins,

**for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
And lead us not into temptation.”**

⁵ And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; ⁷ and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything?’ ⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence^[c] he will rise and give him whatever he needs. ⁹ And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹ What father among you, if his son asks for^[d] a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him 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!”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I imagine that in Jesus’ ministry there were these pivotal moments. Looking back over the last 5 or so chapters of Luke’s Gospel you can see just how much has happened. And I imagine that there might be these moments where his disciples might say to themselves, this is all too much for our feeble understanding to grasp. What do we do with it all? God’s Word has spoken first to us, how shall we respond? What they needed was a sort of binding agent, a way of taking their common everyday lives and responding to the incomprehensible majesty of almighty God. Lord at times it seems as though this is all too much for us to understand. Help us. And when one of them came and found Jesus praying, he asked: Lord, teach us to pray.

Now would it come as a surprise to you if I told you that in all the gospels this the first time Jesus followers actually ask Jesus to teach them something? It’s interesting, they don’t ask: Jesus, how can we make friends and influence people? Or Jesus, how can we harness the miraculous power to heal many lives, and save many souls? They didn’t ask that. They asked for Jesus to teach them about prayer.

It’s strange, Jesus, it seems, is the only one around who hasn’t already taught his followers various prayers. John the Baptist taught his followers how to pray. In the Dead Sea Scrolls (Mishrah and Targum) and in the rabbinical documents there are lots of prayers that teachers gave their pupils to use. Why wouldn’t Jesus teach them, so that after they perform an act of mercy, or give someone something to eat, say this prayer. Or before a great teaching or wise parable, say this prayer. It’s funny, prayer can take on a ceremonial quality, we have books and books of eloquent and finely crafted prayers to say at many different moments, beautifully written prayers that say all the things we wish we were eloquent enough to say on our own.

But Jesus doesn’t seem to be interested in eloquence, he was more interested in his disciples actually witnessing the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God, where lives are healed, blind are given sight, the lame walk, and the mute sing for joy, where barren and dry dismembered bones, like the prophet Ezekiel saw, all of a sudden begin to remember, and fill with life. And he’s more interested in those lives becoming a witness to the inbreaking Kingdom of God.

This is what the disciples had seen. Jairus' daughter alive; Centurion's servant healed; women and men forgiven and set free; Storms calmed; demons put in their place; hungry bellies fed; and we're not even half way through the book.

These disciples have witnessed the embodiment of the God of creation walking in their midst, so somehow it seems that simply regurgitating a prayer that was handed down from their Jewish ancestors just didn't measure up.

Jesus how are we supposed to pray when we see the hurt and need in our communities everyday? How are we to pray for the loved ones we feel helpless to help but know you are the great physician? Jesus how are we to pray when we long deep down in the marrow of our bones for that relationship or that child? How are we to pray when we don't know how to pray. We go to the throne of grace with these simple words. **“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 who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.”**

These are the words he gives us to use. Simple, concise, deeply theological, there's a lot here. We could do an entire sermon series on each one of these clauses individually.

GK Chesterton has a wonderful quote where he says: Anything worth doing is worth doing badly. Anything really good is worth doing badly. If I ever had a chance to play Augusta National, let me tell you the last thing in the world I would be concerned about was my score. Anything worth doing, anything really worth doing, doesn't really matter how skillfully or precisely you do it, the most important thing is that we do it.

Jesus goes on to tell this little parable about the friend who comes to the door of another at midnight. The other says, I'm sorry it's late, my children and I are in bed already, so the other person pounds on the door and pounds on the door, waking up the whole neighborhood, and if he weren't a friend you'd be tempted to call the cops. Finally, he says OK, and puts on his robe and comes down stairs, flips on the light and opens the door. What is it? he says.

Can I have three loaves of bread? A friend of mine has come and I don't have any food for him. And by the way do have any suggestions of late night entertainment for my friends?

Here is the lesson we learn about prayer from this text, prayer is something that is so important, something so valuable for us, something so worth doing that it's even worth doing badly. You don't have to have the right words (fortunately he does give us words), you don't even have to have the right mental attitude, or be in a holy place of life. That's why the bible gives so many different examples of people who pray in different situations. When Jesus was being pursued by those who would eventually crucify him, he cried out in agony. When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, Moses' sister danced and sang for joy, when Isaiah encountered the Lord in his calling, he exalted God for God's holiness. The point is that prayer, our act of conversing with God, is something we can do anytime, and you don't need to be an expert in it, in fact it works just the same even if you do it badly.

In the bible's prayer book, the Psalms, you will hear time and again the Psalmists crying out to God, almost reminding God of who He is and what his promises are. I will live and not die, says Psalm 118, and I will declare the works of the Lord in the land of the living. Give ear to my prayer Lord,

for you bless the righteous, covering them with your favor, like a shield (Psalm 5:2). Lord you have been our dwelling place in all generations (Psalm 91). Hear my prayer O Lord, let my cry come unto you, incline your ear to me and answer me when I call (Psalm 102). And then, as I mentioned earlier from James 5 Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

Listen Jesus says, **ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened...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!"**

God has been all of these things in your life, he's been these things in our lives, and sometimes it's not that we need to remind God of who he is, but we need to remind ourselves of who God is. Because it's easy for us to begin to doubt. When we would sit quietly in that hospital room, there were times when we would simply start quoting scriptures that proclaimed God's healing qualities. We would talk to God, "this is who you say you are, and I believe that who you are is also for me and for us."

The second thing I want to point out about prayer from this parable is the great care God takes in listening to our prayers, even when we're in trouble. Hear this, God doesn't bring the trouble. What kind of God would he be when we pray for fish, if he gave us instead a serpent. Will he immediately give the fish we ask for? Maybe, prayer does work that way, but it doesn't always work that way. Look again at the last line, "**how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"**

Prayer is the binding agent, the tissue that keeps us from falling to pieces, and it keeps us from falling to pieces not by always immediately giving us what we ask for, but more profoundly giving us the thing we most need the Holy Spirit, the comforter, the advocate.

I want to read a passage for you from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 42. Isaiah 42 is a Messianic passage, it's one of the most famous of all, and in it is this surprising assurance that God will hear our prayers.

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street (he'll be quiet and not powerful, he'll take you by surprise); a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

That means that when your prayer is so dim, so weak, such a fragile flicker, the Messiah is strong enough that he will not allow it to be snuffed out. And when your life is so messed up, so confusing, so bent over that it feels like you are about to break that you don't feel like you know how to pray, the good news is that the Messiah will come to you to keep you from breaking by giving you himself.

The Apostle Paul picked up on this when he says: **Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.**

Are you facing something that feels too much to handle, or too confusing to understand, pray.

Are you hoping for an answer that feels so long in coming, pray.

Are you so grateful for a blessing that seemingly fell out of the sky, pray.

Do you want to simply offer God a praise, pray.

And as you pray, I promise you, God will hear. God will send His Spirit. God will answer. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.