

Teach Us to Pray

Luke 11:1-11

Last week, I was at Junior High Week at Camp Okoboji. Part of my duties there included leading the mealtime prayers. Normally the camp counselors do that, but they were doing enough extra jobs this year, I handed the prayers myself. The challenge is, not everyone knows all of the prayers. We did some fun ones, like the Superman prayer or the Jaws prayer. We tried a couple that I knew, but no one else did. The best known ones, though, were what we call the common table prayer and the doxology. The prayers that the campers and staff had learned at home, from their parents and families. They had been taught to pray, and it showed in those prayers.

Today, we hear about prayer. The disciples ask Jesus, "Teach us to pray." They ask Him to apprentice them in prayer. They'd been taught to pray by rabbis in synagogues. They'd learned to pray from their parents. They'd learned to pray through the Psalms. Yet, prayer was not for them a natural thing like breathing. It didn't seem as easy to them as it did to Jesus. And so, they asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

Which he did, using what has come to be the prayer most often prayed by Christians. The prayer we call the Lord's Prayer, though maybe it should more accurately be called the disciples' prayer. Jesus prayed in a different way than the disciples were used to. He talked to God as his Father.

When we pray to God as our Father, we remember that we are the adopted children of God. And when we do that, when we approach God as a child approaches their parent, we remember that we are praying to a God who takes care of us better than our parents could. "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? 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" (Luke 11:11-13).

But more than teaching them what to pray, Jesus taught them how to pray. Jesus taught them to pray persistently. To keep praying, to keep asking. To pray without ceasing. Jesus wanted his disciples to be persistent pray-ers. But not because God was like some annoyed neighbor who would grudgingly give you what you ask, or because God can be pestered into giving you whatever you want. Repeatedly asking God for a new bike, a new car, a million dollars, isn't going to make those things appear. Talking to God in prayer is not like using a vending machine or putting your order in on Amazon. Who would want to live in a world in which anything for which anyone asks would be granted? While it may sound appealing at first, the reality is quite different.

In the film *Bruce Almighty*, one of the climactic scenes occurs after Bruce, who had been given the job of God for the day and had answered everyone's prayers with "yes", sees the results of this action. For example, everyone who prayed to win the lottery won, but won a very small amount because of how many people had won. The following dialogue shows these dangers.

"God: You made a mess of things, huh?

Bruce: I just gave them what they wanted.

God: Yeah, but since when does anyone have a clue what they want?"

Persistently praying doesn't always give you what you want. Instead, persistently praying changes the pray-er, the one doing the praying, to ask for what they need.

Jesus didn't just teach his disciples to pray lecture style. He set a compelling example. He prayed before meals. He prayed for children. He prayed for the sick. He frequently went off by himself to pray, even missing getting on the boat his disciples were using to cross the Sea of Galilee to do so. Even the night he was betrayed, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed. Even from the cross, as he died for us, Jesus prayed. Jesus made prayer a priority.

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, the narrator, Tevye, keeps up a running dialogue with God throughout the show. He gives credit to God for the good things that happen, while lamenting all that goes wrong. He persistently prays.

Mother Teresa said, "If you want to pray better, you must pray more." The All-Star Game and Home Run Derby were this week, and the state softball and baseball tournaments happened here in Iowa this past week, as well. If you wanted to know how those teams made it into the tournament, how those players collected the most votes, how those players hit the most home runs, you'd find out it was because of practice. Time spent playing catch, in the batting cage, working with a coach. Time stretching and running, time spent in the weight room. To achieve at a high level, you have to practice.

Prayer is the same way. You get better at praying in public by praying in public. You get better praying out loud by praying out loud. Prayer rather needs to be learned by the persistent practice of prayer, especially of paying attention to God's Word in prayer, and how Jesus and the disciples pray, how the Psalms are prayers. You get better at praying by praying.

That's why we persistently pray. Our persistent prayers don't change God. Instead, they change us to see the goodness in the world and to see it

with an attitude of gratitude. They help us to see all of God's good gifts.

We pray persistently because God's gifts are given repeatedly.

We pray persistently because it sustains our spiritual life. Just as all of our human relationships are sustained by communication, so too is our relationship with God. We pray to talk with God, to tell God our concerns. We pray, just like talking to a friend or a parent or a child or a spouse, to maintain and strengthen that relationship.

In the Old Testament lesson today, Abraham bargains with God about how many righteous people would need to be found to save Sodom. Abraham stops at ten, but that's still too high. There aren't ten righteous people in Sodom, and so God destroys it. So God sent His Son, Jesus, to be the Righteous One to save the world. Jesus came into the world. Jesus didn't just teach the world to pray. Jesus saved the world. Through Jesus we have forgiveness. Through Jesus we have access to God.

Because of that forgiveness, because of what Jesus did, we can pray with confidence. As Jesus taught His disciples to pray, so He teaches us to pray. We can pray with boldness. We can pray with persistence, to the God that we call Father, and we can be called children of God. And through that persistence, through that prayer, we come to know God better. We come to know the God who gives more willingly than a begrudging neighbor, whose love exceeds that of a father for his child. We come to know the God whose love pales beside any comparison. We come to know the God who gives us what we need. We come to know the God who loves us and forgives us, and whose love will never let us go. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church, Ames, Iowa
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