

## **Your Friend is Waiting**

**Luke 11:1-13**

Do you ever worry about your prayers? I mean, do you ever wonder if you're using the right words, or saying the right things, or saying them in just the right way that will make them work right; you know, get God's attention? In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus' disciples have that same worry. After watching and listening to Jesus pray on his own, they come to him with a startling request: "Lord, teach us to pray."

The request is startling because it suggests that Jesus had possibly been a disappointment to his disciples on this point. You see, John the Baptist had taught his disciples special prayers to recite. In fact, all Rabbis in those days were expected to teach rote prayers, to be memorized just so, to be recited just so. Getting prayer right was not to be left to individual improvisation. We can see this in the Dead Sea Scrolls – many of them contain set prayers for various occasions, with specific instructions for praying them correctly.

Evidently, our Lord had not fulfilled this supposed obligation to his disciples. It's not that they didn't already know prayers to pray; they'd all been taught prayers from childhood. Yet, there was something about Jesus' prayers that seems to have caught their attention; something different from the prayers they had been taught. It made them feel that there must be something more to this prayer thing, something deeper than they knew. So, they ask, in effect, "Lord, teach us to pray, (like you)."

Notice the amazing answer Jesus gives. It must have taken the Disciples by surprise. First, he teaches them only one very short prayer, not a great oratorical masterpiece, and then he tells them two parables. The shortened form of the prayer, which we know as The Lord's Prayer, follows:

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.”

Now Jesus tells them the first of two parables. “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Stop bothering me; the door is already locked, and my children are in bed; I can’t help you.’” Jesus’ listeners were, no doubt, shocked by that twist in the story. It was considered the absolute obligation of a friend, in that culture, to always help. Jesus always has a twist in his parables.

What follows is the intentionally humorous part of this parable: we can imagine Jesus smiling as he says, “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because he keeps banging on the door, he will get up and give him whatever he needs.” So, the first friend keeps knocking on the door saying, “I know you’re in there; come out and help me!” And the second friend finally relents just to get some peace and quiet. Jesus’ listeners would now be laughing, and seeing this as justice for the second, and lousy friend.

Jesus’ point is this: he is a real friend; a good friend who will not turn away a friend in need. That’s the real point about the knocking. We wouldn’t keep on knocking at a stranger’s house; they’d call 911, (if we’re lucky!). But it is okay to keep knocking at a friend’s house. So, this parable is not about banging down God’s door. It’s about seeking help from a good friend; a friend who will help.

Then, Jesus tells them a second parable about God being a loving parent who wants to give good things to his children. Jesus then closes with this: “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9, NIV). Think about those action words he chooses. *Ask. Seek. Knock.* They’re totally secular, nonreligious words that he uses to describe prayer.

The disciples wanted to know how to pray and they wanted to know how to pray correctly. From what we understand of the first-century period, getting it right was the most important part of one’s prayer life. It is very hard to unlearn that instinct. We, too, want to do things just right, especially those things that we know are very important. We don’t want to make any mistakes on something as important as prayer. Maybe that’s because prayer is often thought of as like an incantation. That’s what many in the Disciples’ day thought. That’s what many think of prayer even today; that it’s something that has to be done just so, the words spoken exactly right; almost as if the words were a magical incantation that loses power if said wrong.

But, just here, Jesus has good news for you and me. Christian prayer is not at all about perfection, or using the right words, or saying them in just the right way. Jesus deliberately gives his disciples just one set prayer to memorize and recite. Then he gives them the assurance of God’s loving desire to hear God’s children, and Jesus’ own assurance of his friendship to help. In other words, we are granted the freedom to create our own prayers, however imperfect, and can know that they will work, that they will be heard, because of that love and friendship.

Another way to look at this is that Christian prayer is not the exclusive provenance of religious professionals to create and then hand down. Instead, it is the domain of amateurs; that is, as that Latin word actually translates, people who pray for the love of it. There are, of course, occasions for set prayers: communal worship, for instance, when we all

want to pray, literally “on the same page,” and other times when a memorized series of set prayers has deep personal meaning that connects us into the presence of God. Set prayers have their place. But Jesus wanted to guard his disciples from the spiritual trap of thinking that this was all, that only such rote prayers were effective. Christian prayer is primarily an amateur event. It’s for those who make it up as they go.

When, then, should we pray? I have two times to suggest that we pray. The first is when we feel like it. When we feel moved to pray. When we are grateful, or when we are in a grave emergency in which we need help; these are obvious times to pray. Never feel guilty for praying from a foxhole; even if you dug it yourself. Pray whenever you feel like it. You and I have the right to knock on that friend’s door, because Jesus is our friend.

The other time I would suggest to pray is when we don’t feel like it; when we feel dried up spiritually, or when we feel that the friendship has gone cold. Pray especially when there seems to be no point; when you feel no hope.

Pray when you feel like it, and, pray when you don’t feel like it. Prayer is the language of our relationship with Jesus. Because it is about love, prayer is honest. Sometimes it is the language of joy; full of thanksgiving and wonder. And, sometimes it is the language of urgent pleas for help; filled with fear. But always it is an amateur event; done for the love of it. That’s prayer. That’s all it takes!

As Jesus is your friend, you have the right to barge right in! He wants you to show up. That’s all prayer is; just showing up to talk together. Show up as you are, as an amateur. Ask, seek, knock. Your friend is waiting!