

## Luke 11: 1-13 What We Pray For

Last week, the Stated Clerk of our Presbytery, Elder Stephen Rhoades brought the message of hope that does not disappoint, the kind of hope that is beyond wishful thinking or a mere expression of random self-interest: the kind of hope that aligns with God's hope for us, and that's our Hope in God, grounded in faith. When our hope is in God who intends for us nothing less than rich and abundant life, that hope will not disappoint us.

And prayer, the theme of today's passage from Luke, is very closely related to that. Together with Hope and Faith, it's part and parcel of the Truth that guides Christian life, because it connects our earthly lives with the Kingdom of God that is at hand.

Prayer that Jesus teaches us to pray turns our sometime mundane and at times painful everyday lives into one that participates in the coming Kingdom of God, revealing to us and fulfilling for us our deepest desire.

Prayer, if we pray as Jesus teaches us to pray, makes us the agents of God's intention to bring the fullness of God's reign to fruition, filling our lives with meaning and joy.

Naturally, we pray HOPING and TRUSTING that God hears our prayers and answers them. So, when Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he was teaching them, and by extension us, how to pray a prayer that does not disappoint us.

We often hear "If you pray hard enough, sincerely enough, earnestly enough, God will grant you whatever you ask." Just like the popular phrase "God helps those who help themselves," which we talked about a few weeks ago, is not in the Bible, this notion of how prayer works is not biblical, at least not without qualification.

The outcome of our prayers does NOT depend on our human ability to pray in such a way that it bends God's will to meet our will. As a close reading of today's Scripture readings will show us, it's actually the other way around. The prayer Jesus taught us brings our will to match God's will for us. When we pray as Jesus taught us, we become collaborators with God in bringing the Kingdom of God.

How? Let us turn to the Scripture.

In this model prayer Jesus taught his disciples, and by extension Jesus is teaching us, he first calls us to acknowledge who God is in relation to us: "Father, hallowed be your name." God is our heavenly parent. Human parents, as hard as we try, we don't always get it right, but God is the perfect parent who does not fail to provide for the needs of the children and gives what God knows is best for the kids. Our prayer begins in our trust in God as such parent. Our hope for our prayer being answered depends not on our own earnestness but on God's faithfulness as a loving Parent.

Then the prayer leads us to acknowledge and yearn for God's kingdom: "Your Kingdom come." Coming of the kingdom of God, where God's love rules and everyone's need is met and we all live in peace, is the first thing Jesus has us yearn and ask for.

Our longing for the reign of God, on earth as it is in heaven, is the foundation for all other desires that we may bring to God in prayer. All other "asks" would be in service of this goal. Everything else we ask in prayer follows from this one ultimate desire if we are praying as Jesus teaches us.

Only after establishing our relationship with God and who God is and framing the prayer in the context of our longing for the world under God's reign, does Jesus invites us to ask for our essential, existential needs. First, Jesus prompts ask for our daily bread, our sustenance for both physical and spiritual

nourishment. Like the mana God sent to the Israelites in the wilderness, it cannot be hoarded. We are to rely on God's provision day to day, from moment to moment; it's an acknowledgement of God as the source of all good things and the provider of all that we require. As we will see later in the story, even as we ask for our daily bread, God is using us to provide the bread to those in need.

Then, Jesus leads us to ask for forgiveness for our own failings, as we forgive others who are indebted to us. We are to be merciful, as God shows mercy to us. This is foundational to our reconciliation with God and with one another, to make for peace. It is the bedrock of God's beloved community where God's justice is God's mercy. We are being co-creators with God of God's beloved community when we ask for forgiveness and strive to forgive others. How much healing would there be if all of us prayed this prayer every night.

“And” lastly, “do not bring us to the time of trial.” We are to pray for the preservation of our faith; protection, that is, from circumstances that would endanger our faith so we can remain in the trusting relationship with God. We pray to God to undergird our faith in God.

In this prayer, Jesus is teaching us what to ask for, when in the same breath we pray “your Kingdom come.” And those are the very things God already knows as our needs and God is eager to give them to us, because they serve God's purpose of bringing the fullness of God's reign.

After teaching the disciples this prayer, without missing a beat, Jesus tells a story of a certain man who went to his friend in the middle of the night, asking to lend him three loaves of bread. This friend does not want to be bothered and rejects the man's request. Then Jesus says, even if this man doesn't help on the account of their friendship, if you keep asking, because of your persistence, the friend will get up and give you whatever you need.

Then Jesus says, “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” At first glance, this sounds like the morale of the story is “keep banging on the door until it is open to you, don’t give up, persist, and you get what you need.” If you pray hard enough, earnestly enough, etc. And yet, there is a detail in this story that flips this notion on its head.

What is this man asking his friend to do? To lend him three loaves of bread. Why? Is it because he is hungry? No, he explains “a friend of mine has arrived and I have nothing to set before him.”

In the Jewish community of that time, Hospitality was more than just a matter of politeness or a friendly gesture. Just as loving your neighbor as yourself was a command, it was a social imperative that held the fabric of a society together, a society that did not rely on calculated transactional exchange but on the spirit of sacrificial generosity.

This man was not asking for bread to satisfy his own hunger; he was asking for what he lacked in order to fulfill this sacred duty of hospitality to yet another friend who showed up at his door. In that moment, the “daily bread” for his traveling friend was to come through his hands; he was to be the answer to that prayer, but he did not have anything to offer. So, he knocks on the door of another friend, asking for the bread. This is where we are called to persist until we receive what we need.

When what we pray for align with what God desires for us, the prayer will be answered. What God wants is what’s best for us, and sometimes that’s beyond our wildest imagination, because we are, more often than not, so near sighted in what we want, and we often conveniently forget, to our own detriment and to the detriment of others, that what is good for our community is ultimately good for everyone in it. See, Jesus’s prayer is always communal. It is not a display of

personal piety; it invokes within us a deep desire to be part of shaping God's beloved community.

When our behavior is based on our decision that considers the good of everyone, we are creating a piece of the kingdom of heaven here on earth. The world where I can thrive, is the world that empowers everyone else me to thrive.

This passage concludes with Jesus telling us, if even we the human parents who don't always get it right give to our children the good gifts, how much more will God the Parent give what we need to those who ask.

And what does God the Parent give to those who ask? The Gift of the Holy Spirit, says Jesus. Because it is the Holy Spirit that guides our hearts, so that our desire for ourselves matches God's desire for us. God gives us what we need to be God's collaborator in the coming kingdom of God.

The good gift our heavenly parent gives us is the Holy Spirit, because when we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, we will desire what God desires; we will pray for what God already knows as good for us, and for the world. The Holy Spirit helps us see beyond our narrow self-interest and dares us to ask for abundance and goodness for all.

In what way do we show hospitality in our community? Our food pantry, for sure; opening the doors of the church to the outside groups who need space; bringing worship experience to those who are at home. As a congregation, I wonder what other manifestation of hospitality we can engage in this ever-changing environment. As we pray together in discernment, we know God will provide all that we require.

A few concluding words, going back to the story of Abraham and God's conversation in the Genesis passage we heard earlier. God calls Abraham to charge his family to do righteousness and justice, which are the characters of people that promote life and well-being for all in every relational

sphere. Their lives would correspond to God's intentions for the world, which is to bless all nations.

When God has heard the outcry against the city of Sodom; God engages Abraham in the discernment over the fate of the city. "Outcries" in the Bible implies oppression and injustice. When Abraham realized that God was considering wiping out the entire city, he dares to approach God to reconsider. Abraham does not want those who are in right relationship with God to perish along with those in the wrong. Appealing to God's justice, Abraham persists in asking him to spare the city for the sake of the righteous ones, reducing the number of the righteous to ever smaller numbers and God would still spare the city, from 50, 40, 45, 30, 20, all the way down to 10. God does not want to wipe out his creation, either. In this process, Abraham's desire and God's desire come together. For the 10 righteous ones, God will not destroy the city. Alas, the city gets destroyed, though those counted among the righteous had been removed beforehand.

In fullness of time, God sent one Jesus, in whom God was very pleased, so that, for the sake of this One, the world might be saved. Thanks be to God. Amen.