

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
July 24, 2016

Luke 11: 1-13

We say it every Sunday in worship. We know the words by heart. We have said them since we were children. If we are at a different church, we might get confused when we hear “trespasses” instead of “debts.” But God knows what we mean. And that’s what matters in the end.

I’m talking, of course, about the Lord’s Prayer. It is a prayer that is as much a part of Christian worship as scripture, preaching, and music. It is said both in the communal setting of public worship, and in the individual setting of private devotion. Last Sunday, we said it simultaneously in English and Spanish in our VBS worship service. Maybe we didn’t understand what our Hispanic sisters and brothers were saying. But God knew what we all were saying. And that’s what matters in the end.

Sometimes in the church, we can question why we do certain things or say certain things as a part of our worship. We might question the need for using creeds or prayers or statements from the past that don’t appear to have much relevance to us in the 21st-century world. I’ve thought about that quite a lot as someone who is charged with planning worship each Sunday. Why is it important to continue to use the Apostle’s Creed or the Lord’s Prayer or other ancient texts? Why not use only modern resources for our modern world?

When I start to wander down that line of reasoning, I am brought back to how our passage begins today in Luke’s Gospel. “Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples’” (11:1). In other words, the Lord’s Prayer is the direct result of one of Jesus’ followers asking for guidance, seeking direction. It is a teaching, a prayer, a lesson for those who seek to follow God.

Whenever we say the Lord’s Prayer, or the Apostle’s Creed, or some other ancient statement, I am reminded that Christians for over 2,000 years have said these words, have prayed these petitions, have professed their faith in this way. We are not only saying this prayer for ourselves in the present, but we are saying it with millions of saints who gave gone before us. When we are struggling, when we feel lost, when we can’t find the words to pray, Jesus responds to our plea – “Lord, teach us to pray” – with the Lord’s Prayer.

Joy Douglas Strome is a Presbyterian pastor in Chicago, and she writes:

It is hard for average people to muster the kind of confidence that Jesus expresses in his three-part lesson on prayer. Your kingdom come: The kingdom seems light years away. Give us each day our daily bread: People die of hunger all the time, even in affluent countries. Forgive us our sins: Forgiveness is the exception, certainly not the rule. Do not bring us to the time of trial: The trials that many people endure are so horrific they cannot be detailed in print. The petitions in the prayer, when we are reading them and not saying them, lie cold and flat on the page . . .

The disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, and he responds, as we might expect, with something more than a how-to list. He offers the skeleton of the Lord's Prayer, then two examples. In prayer we must be as persistent as the one who goes for help in the middle of the night. We must ask for a response and expect that God will respond in a way above and beyond our human experiences with one another . . .

Our worship life centers on this notion of prayer. Ask and it will be given to you. Search and you will find. If this is our way, we had better be confident that we believe this, because we can be sure that there is a little child in a pew who is asking: Please, God, all I ask is that my parents get back together. Or please, God I don't want my dad to go to (war). Or please, God, if I could just understand what I did wrong, maybe the hitting would stop. The answers to these big questions don't come in a sweet little song about seeking and finding. They come in the context of a community that is willing to wager – no, willing to stake its life – on the belief that prayers are answered and that God does respond to human need and suffering. To stake your life on this claim means letting God have access to your own hands and feet when they're needed.

Our worship life is centered on this notion of prayer. The Lord's Prayer is said, in some configuration, in almost every house of Christian worship, every Sunday, all across our land. In each of those places, worshipers believe that yes, God will bring a kingdom that is peaceful, that God will provide for our daily food, that God will forgive our unbelief and that God will shield us from trials that we can't handle. Despite the diversity in our traditions and practices, this simple little prayer may very well be our most basic common denominator . . .

(Joy Douglas Strome, "Prayer Power," Christian Century, July 10, 2007: 19).

But I believe as modern-day Christians, it can be hard to always hold strong to that belief. I have to admit that my prayer life has taken a beating these last several weeks, in the face of one act of senseless violence after another. "Your kingdom come" – where is it, God? "Do not bring us to the time of trial" – how many more trials do we have to experience, Lord? "Give us each day our daily bread" – why must so many go hungry, go thirsty, go without shelter, Our Father? What

difference does prayer really make? Why keep at it if all we keep witnessing is devastating heartbreak day after day?

Perhaps the parable Jesus tells speaks to this temptation. In that parable, Jesus speaks of a man who goes to his friend's home in the middle of the night. A surprise visitor has arrived, and this man has nothing to offer him to eat. He begs his friend, who has already gone to bed, to give him some bread for his guest. The friend doesn't get up, even though in that time and culture, it was an expectation that such hospitality would be offered. And then Jesus compares the lazy, non-responsive friend to God! "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs" (11:8).

James Wallace writes: *Jesus ends this prayer session with a parable and some advice urging persistence. In a world where hospitality was highly prized, the continuous and shameless knocking would broadcast to the world the shameless behavior of a friend who stays in bed rather than answer hospitality's urgent need. So, keep on asking, searching, knocking – be equally shameless in your prayer so that God will not risk having his clients expose divine shamelessness for refusing to take care of them as a good father or patron would. Here God is presented as sleepy friend who needs to be shaken awake by a shameless friend. Luke goes on to say that God's way of giving exceeds that of human friends, gifting all who ask with the Holy Spirit* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 291*).

I wonder if when we start believing our prayer life is not influential or making a difference, we have forgotten the essence of prayer. Prayer is not a wish list of expectations we have for God to fulfill for our pleasure or satisfaction. It starts with letting go, with turning ourselves over to God, and asking, as we do each Sunday: "Your will be done, on earth and in heaven." Not our will. God's will. Not our kingdom. God's kingdom. Not our name be praised. God's name be praised. When that is our center, our foundation, our starting point in prayer, then all of our petitions come not from selfish motives, but in and through the name of the one in whose name we always pray.

In our congregation, we seek to offer our prayer petitions in many different ways. We write them on these prayer cards each week. We share them in written form in our Sunday bulletins. We include them each week in our weekly email newsletters. We speak them in worship, in meetings, in small group settings. We write them on the prayer wall in the main hallway. We have a prayer team that meets regularly to lift up to God these and other prayer requests.

Sometimes we share these petitions out of deep personal concern – a family member who is ill, a friend who is struggling, a community that is torn apart. But I also have seen ways in which our congregation

has grown in its caring nature to be a community of prayer in deep, intentional ways.

Last week, a member of the church asked me to resend my weekly email, because she could not read the prayer requests, and wanted to be sure to remember those people in her daily prayer life.

Last Sunday, in our joint worship service with Iglesia Nueva Creacion, we shared joys and concerns in worship. And as the one who was moving all over the sanctuary with the microphone(!), I was struck by how this is now such a central part of our worship life: that we celebrate our joys, and we show compassion and care in our concerns, all in the spirit that God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. That was not always the case, but now it is a core trait of this open, caring, community.

What more can we do to show the kind of persistence in prayer Jesus speaks of? How can we bang on the door of God, not giving up, or feeling as if our prayers don't matter? Are we willing to stake our lives on the belief that God will open the door at which we are knocking? Are we ready to truly pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done?" Are we prepared for God's answers to our prayers, even if they take us in directions we never could have dreamed of?

If we are prepared to truly pray with Jesus, then our heavenly Father will shower us with grace, hope and love. As we pray faithfully to the one triune God, may we trust that our prayers are being heard, and that God will give us what God knows we need to live lives of faithfulness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.