

“Teach Us to Pray”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Worship at Meadowood Park – Speedway, Indiana
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Luke 11: 1-13

So, this morning we’re going to be talking about prayer. Let me start by asking you some questions. What are some things you often find yourself praying for? In other words, what are some consistent themes in your own prayer life? (ask for responses) Very good, that’s great. One day last week, I was driving around I-465, and I got slowed down in one of the numerous construction zones that are up this summer. I looked over at one of the cars in front of me, and it had a bumper sticker on it that said: “Life is short. Pray hard.” My first reaction was, “Yeah, my life was almost made shorter by driving on this interstate. I’ve been praying hard ever since I got on it!”

Our prayer life can center on many things. We can pray hard when we are going on a trip, and we ask God to keep us safe going and coming. We can pray hard when a loved one is undergoing medical tests, and we ask God to provide clear understanding and direction for his or her ongoing care. We can pray hard when a friend is struggling and feeling lost, and we ask God to offer guidance, direction, and joyfulness for the road ahead. We can pray hard for our community and country, and we ask God for peace in our streets, prosperity for those who are downtrodden, and wisdom for those who have been elected to lead us. Our prayer life can center on many things.

Now, let me ask you a slightly different question. How have you experienced your prayers being answered by God? In other words, how have you felt God hearing and acting on the prayers you have lifted up to God? (ask for responses) That’s great – thanks for sharing those with us.

I think one thing is clear from those responses, and that is that we all see God answering our prayers in different ways. When I was younger, I often prayed for a way out of a problem I had gotten myself into. In seminary, a blizzard hit Princeton, New Jersey, right before final exams were to take place. I will admit that I prayed for a delay in the start of finals, because I simply was not prepared yet to take my first exam. Mercifully, the exams were delayed by a couple of days, and my transcript doesn’t look as bad as it would have had that snowstorm not hit when it did!

But answered prayer can take on other forms, as well. Maybe you pray to God for discernment about what to do next in your life, and a friend calls, and your conversation leaves you with a greater sense of peace about the future. Maybe you pray to God that you really want to

be accepted into this one college, but when you don't get in, another school offers you an outstanding opportunity, and in looking back, you realize what a gift that was in your life. Maybe you pray to God to bring you relief from the chronic pain you have been in, and a stranger offers to carry those grocery bags and load them in your car, limiting your pain for a brief moment. Answered prayer can come in many different forms.

Prayer is at the heart of our scripture from Luke today. It begins by saying that Jesus "was praying in a certain place." And once he was done, one of his disciples asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." The disciple didn't ask Jesus what they should pray for, or how to discern when their prayers were answered. The disciple asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. It is from that response that we are given the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that is offered in Christian worship every Sunday, all around the world, in a multitude of languages, which we will say together in just a little while. Jesus gives us the words to use when we are at a loss for how to pray. And in so doing, we are invited into an ever-deepening relationship with our God through prayer.

Joy Douglas Strome is a Presbyterian pastor, 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).

So, this morning, I'm not the only Rev. Mansell preaching in the Indianapolis area. My wife, Debbie, is leading worship at Clayton Presbyterian Church this morning, and she got her sermon done before me this week. The benefit of that is that I got to read hers before I wrote mine! And I really appreciated what she said about prayer as it relates to this passage from Luke.

Debbie writes: *Our theological ancestor John Calvin thought of prayer as offering and opening our hearts to God. In prayer, Calvin said, the human heart is "poured out and laid open before God, the searcher of hearts" (John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3.20.29.). This understanding of prayer helps me to make more sense of verses 9-10 (Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you). I often meet people who seem to have a transactional understanding of prayer, sort of like a vending machine. With a vending machine, if I put in the correct amount of money and press the right buttons, I'll get the drink or snack that I was expecting.*

God doesn't work like that. I can ask for what I want in prayer, but that's no guarantee that my prayer will be answered like I hope or like I expect. So, part of prayer is asking, searching, and knocking. That's us opening our hearts to God. The next step is God's to take - to search our hearts - and to hold us in relationship, regardless if the giving, the finding, or the answering is what we had hoped for or expected (Debbie Mansell, "Really, God?!", July 28, 2019).

I will tell you that my faith in prayer wavered significantly two years ago. And I very much was looking at prayer like a vending machine.

My dad had been diagnosed with leukemia, but we didn't yet know what form it was - whether it was treatable or not. I had been in West Virginia with my parents while he was in the hospital all week, but I had to leave on Saturday morning. I can tell you that I drove those six hours in the car through tears in my eyes, and God and I had quite an open and honest conversation. There was yelling, there was pleading, there was bargaining, and there was utter despondency. Debbie's father had died unexpectedly seven months earlier. Surely, God, you're not going to take my dad away in the same year, as well? Look at all the coins our family has put in the spiritual vending machine. Just give us some good news, God. You owe me that, don't you think?

When the call came from my parents three days later that my father's leukemia was incurable and untreatable, my faith in prayer was devastated. In my mind, God didn't answer my or my family's prayers. The vending machine kept my money, and I got nothing when I made my selection. Where was my answered prayer? What kind of God does this to me? To us?

Part of prayer is asking, searching, and knocking. Opening our hearts to God. The next step is God's to take - to search our hearts - and to hold us in relationship, regardless if the giving, the finding, or the answering is what we had hoped for or expected.

I thought curing or saving my father from his illness would be the answer to my prayer. In fact, it was through the next three months until he died, and then the time after his death, that was evidence that God had searched my heart and held me in relationship with him. The conversations we had together; the time Debbie spent talking to him about his wishes regarding his care towards the end of his life; Thanksgiving at their house; all of us being present at his bedside when he died; the gift of this congregation to allow me to be gone for Christmas Eve so I could be in West Virginia - those things and so many more are how I knew God heard me and was deeply present through all of that time. Once I stopped looking at prayer as black and white, yes or no, the fix to all my problems - and instead considered how I was opening my heart to God - then I was able to receive God's answer, an answer forged in love.

How are we all called to open our hearts to God as we pray to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer? 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.