

Shamelessly Praying

Luke 11: 1-13

11 He 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.” ²So he said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, may your name be revered as holy.

May 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.”

And he said to them, “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, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

In one of her books, Anne Lamott says there are three kinds of prayer: the help prayer, the thank you prayer, and the wow prayer. Sounds right. Or maybe you grew up with the ACTS acronym: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. Prayer isn’t something Presbyterians are known for talking about too often. The Bible, yes. Doing things decently and orderly, yes. Saying, “We need a committee for that!” yes. But prayer? Not so much. Still there’s Jesus is off having some prayer time to recharge his batteries as the disciples watch him. Notice: there is something about him they desire to imitate. Maybe it is that he can actually do things like heal and cast out evil. Maybe he radiates something divine they desire to tap into. Whatever it is, they ask him, “How do we pray so we can imitate your imagination and influence?”

We might wonder the same question: how do we pray in such a way that does something? There are churches who pray for our leaders around the world, including Putin, for their hearts to be arrested by God’s imagination for peace and love, but honestly does it do anything? I don’t mean to sound sac religious, but if petitions and protests don’t seem to change hearts, what is prayer going to do? We pray and children still go hungry. We plead with God and our loved ones still die. We hear about thoughts and prayers being sent after another mass shooting and it’s not enough. The disciples ask, “How do we pray in a way that wields your healing power?” And we, at some point at least, have probably wondered the same question.

But notice how Jesus responds. He gives them a short little prayer about the kingdom and bread and forgiveness. But then he gets into something deeper. Imagine, he says, someone's hosting a little party for some friends, and they run out of bread—or more realistically guacamole dip. So they go to the neighbor's and ask to borrow some, but the neighbor has a newborn and doesn't want to move cause they are afraid of waking the baby. Except the neighbor in need is persistent and keeps knocking and asking. And so what happens? The parent realizes that the knocking is just as loud as them getting up and simply giving them what they want. So Jesus is basically saying: don't worry about the words you pray, just keep asking for it. Be persistent and as shameless as possible.

Have you ever seen a kid ask one parent for something to which the parent says “no.” So what does the child do? Maybe they go to the other parent! Or, in our case, they just keep asking the same parent every two minutes. They are shameless and eventually they wear us down. “How much more does God function the same way?”, Jesus asks. It's less about the words and more about simply asking for what we need over and over and over again.

So, do we realize what this means? God desires to give us what we need—sometimes maybe even what we want. Not always on our terms, of course. But what kind of parent would give a lump of coal when the child asked for a bicycle? What parent does not desire to give their child the most flourishing life possible? God created a universe which is benevolent; one where there is enough for everyone. God is generous. God desires for us all to thrive. You see, Jesus is poking a hole in that saying we've heard again and again about how “God always answers our prayers, but sometimes the answer is no.” Jesus says what kind of a parent would say no to their child thriving? What kind of parent when their child was hungry, would put the kiddo to the test to see if they really loved them or not? I mean, what would this say about God? Jesus is reorienting our understanding of who God is. God's desire is to give us what we need so we can thrive. And if we pray and belong to a God whose desire is for us to thrive, perhaps our desire will be for others to thrive as well.

Of course, we know just because we ask for something, doesn't mean we are going to get it. There is enough tragedy and trauma in the world to realize God's power is not like a vending machine—although sometimes I really wish it were like that. Instead, notice what Jesus does promise: he says when we dare to ask, we will be *given the Holy Spirit*—the gift-giving-alongside-of-us-advocate who strengthens and sustains, who comforts and provokes us to keep persistently praying and working for the sake of peace and justice and love. And then perhaps, when we keep praying inside the flow of God's desire for the world, eventually we become the embodiment of what we've been praying for...

There is a story about Mother Theresa. She was meeting with some big wig executives to ask for some financial support with her ministry. They told her, “We are great supporters for what you are doing, but we aren't ready to support you financially at this time.” Mother Theresa just smiled and said, “Very well, let us pray: Dear heavenly Father, I ask that your generous Spirit be upon these children of God. Bless them so they may in turn be a blessing for others. Amen.” The two executives said, “Thank you for the lovely prayer, but we aren't ready to support you at this time.” To which Mother Theresa said, “Very well, let us pray...”

When it comes to justice, we are to be persistent.

When it comes to peace, we are to be persistent.

When it comes to forgiveness...

And in a time when most—if not all—of us are exhausted and feeling defeated, perhaps the only power persistent enough to keep us going is the power of God's life-giving, lung-filling, fire-descending Spirit.

When we pray, we do eventually become the embodiment of what we've been praying for and, in our own way, we *do acquire God's imagination and influence*. We might not be given exactly what we want, but God's promise is that we will always be given what we need. And I mean, can any of us think of a time when that wasn't true?

The desire of God's Spirit is here for God's beloved children. All we have to do is be shameless enough to keep asking for it. Amen.