



Sermon Series: “A Visit to the Good Physician”
“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

Preaching Text: Luke 11:1-13
28 July 2013: 10th Sunday after Pentecost
FUMC of Arlington, Texas 76011

One of our keener members took me to task for not keeping the flock informed about what my son Neil—a former custodian for four+ years—was up to recently. Neil, as some of you know, left for Madagascar and the Peace Corps for the next twenty-seven months. Two years doesn't seem too long until the day after you put your kid on an airplane—then it seems an eternity. Not only that, but we have little if any communication from him for two months or so as the PC volunteers get adjusted to a new culture and language. Neil did call his mother on a pre-paid cell phone and told her he was fine and to send a care package with peanut butter and other assorted staples. It was the only communication we have had in 2 ½ weeks. He did say he thinks it is all great! All of which got me to thinking about communication and how when it is lacking we seem to notice.

Ours is a communications age. We communicate in ways hardly imagined a century ago—or even a decade ago for those not “in the know.” With new modes of communication comes an increase in attempts at connection. I say “attempts,” because sometimes our efforts fail. Weekly I get an apology from someone whose computer was hacked and emails sent to all of his/her contacts. More curious, although Jack Payne rarely gets mail here at church anymore, Don Pike still gets junk mail and he has been retired for over sixteen years. Thus, my point—although we think we communicate and relate a lot, often our best efforts flop. Today's lesson is about spiritual communication.

Hear the day's lesson from Luke 11:1-13:

He [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.” 2 He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. 3 Give us each day our daily bread. 4 And forgive us our sins, for we



ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

5 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; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ 7 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.’ 8 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.

9 “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. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 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” (Luke 11:1-13)!

Prayer is one of the truly overt religious acts in which many Christians participate. You may believe in the laying on of hands or the anointing of oil, although you never participate in these practices. Yet most observant Christian folks at least practice prayer. As a religious professional—[he says with tongue in cheek]—I know very little about prayer although I practice it a lot—more now that my youngest child is eight times zones in the future!

Some years ago, when Leonard Griffith was pastor of the London’s City Temple, he wrote a fascinating book entitled *Barriers to Christian Belief*. In it Griffith dealt with issues that have been stumbling blocks for people on their faith journeys . . . specific problems that hinder people, which burden people, which disturb people . . . and keep us away from the Christian faith. A prime issue listed was . . . “unanswered prayer.” It does seem to be true of our experience that people do get discouraged, give up, and leave faith because they feel a sense of failure in the life of prayer. This leads us to ask, like Jesus’ disciples asked . . . “How do we pray?” Evidently, Jesus’ disciples wanted to know how to pray and assumed Jesus could teach them. So he said . . . “When you



pray, say”

Thus, one thing we can say is that praying has to do with communication, but maybe not the way we often assume. According to an Austrian-British philosopher who worked primarily in logic, Ludwig Wittgenstein, words are like tools in a tool-box. Words are instruments of language which may have varying uses, according to the purposes for which language may be used. The varying ways in which words may be used help to structure our concepts of reality. When we pray we use words and like our first words, then phrases, then simple sentences—someone must teach us and that is what our lesson is about—Jesus teaching the disciples.

Then and now, a religious community has a distinctive way of praying; we express our instinctive spiritual life by the Lord’s Prayer. Luke’s account of the Lord’s Prayer is shorter than Matthew’s, the one with which we are most familiar. But nonetheless we approach God in a personal way, as “Father.” His “name” is more than just a name: we pray that all may give respect due to him, so all may see God’s love. “Your kingdom come” anticipates the Kingdom, where all barriers—of wealth, gender, and ritual cleanness—will no longer exist. Of the prayers five petitions, the last two seek to fulfill our needs. “Bread,” for example, is what we need to live; it is God’s gift to us. Yet the other three petitions concern God’s nature and majesty—something to keep in mind.

Following the teaching of the prayer, Jesus tells two stories: even one who is asleep with his family responds “because of . . . tenacity” to a neighbor in need; a parent provides for a child. Even these folks, separated from God (as in “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children”), respond to the needs of others. How much more so will God respond to our prayers for help, through the Holy Spirit? This is a clear case of Jesus using an argument “from the lesser to the greater.”

One of the reasons that prayer is so frustrating to modern people like us is because we seem to be exchanging our esteem and worship of God for worship of



ourselves. Why? Because the locus of human significance is the individual and it is now more important than the community's importance. In an article in the *New York Times* titled "The Gospel According to Me" Simon Critchley writes:

Despite the frequent claim that we are living in a secular age defined by the death of God, many citizens in rich Western democracies have merely switched one notion of God for another—abandoning their singular, omnipotent . . . deity reigning over all humankind and replacing it with a weak but all-pervasive idea of spirituality tied to a personal ethic of authenticity and a liturgy of inwardness. The latter does not make the exorbitant moral demands of traditional religions, which impose bad conscience, guilt, sin, sexual inhibition and the rest ("The Gospel According to Me." Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster; Copyright 2013 *The New York Times* 29 June 2013).

These words describe the world of many modern people these days and perhaps even their faith: self-centered, arrogant, egocentric, narcissistic, preoccupied with self, in a word—pride. Bishop Willimon reminds us about popular preaching that focuses too much on us and too little on God:

Preaching that is boring is preaching that talks first about us and then only tangentially about God. Preaching that is faithful is preaching that talks first about God and then only secondarily and derivatively talks about us. The God of Scripture is so much more interestingly than we are (Will Willimon from "My Advice for Preachers" in *Best Advice: Wisdom on Ministry from 30 Leading Pastors and Preachers*; edited by William J. Carl, III).

The bottom line with respect to prayer is this; we too often think our faith is about us. We too often think our prayers are about us speaking. But perhaps the tradition of the church, including such spiritual luminaries as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley might remind us that authentic prayer is more about listening God's voice than it is us telling God what we think God needs to know—about us and our issues, our problems, our lives.

I have mentioned this before, but Bernard Lown has written a remarkable book titled, *The Lost Art of Healing*, in which he shares notable vignettes and case studies drawn from his 45 years of medical practice. He urges doctors to exercise attentive listening, to desist from using intimidating language, and to pay attention to the emotional stresses in patients' lives.



This is good counsel for ministers as well. Not only that but in our prayer life it might be good for us to remember that while prayer is about communication, spiritual communication comes not so much about our telling God our problems, our issues, and our difficulties as much as us listening to God revealed in Jesus. Instead of asking “how do we use God to fix our little lives,” what might it be like if we understand prayer has to do with how we let God talk to us about life in Jesus, who is as Colossians reminds us . . .

. . . the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

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