



**Worship Series: “The Hospitality of Jesus”**

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

“What are you asking for?”—Sermon Text: Luke 11:1-13

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

24 July 2016

“My constant prayer for myself is to be used in service for the greater good

--Oprah Winfrey (Stanford Commencement Address, 2008).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

1 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.” 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)!

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Of all the questions that Jesus’ disciples asked, it is of interest that among them would be:

“Lord, teach us to pray”. After all, as religious types we believe prayer arrives part and parcel with faith. Yet from numerous biblical citations regarding prayer there must have certainly been much unease and confusion about prayer and its essential nature. Thus when Jesus teaches the disciples what to say as they pray, among the directives is the phrase “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” Readers may well conclude that what God does for us we then in turn do for others. This supposition is a first order discipleship way of thinking. We share our time and treasures with others because God has loaned these talents to us in order to build up God’s realm.

Let's look at the Luke lesson for a moment. Luke's Gospel text has three parts. First is the response to the disciples' question, which is Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. Next Jesus tells the "friend at midnight" parable. Finally Jesus tells the disciples "so I say to you . . ." In these verses of *paraenesis* (exhortation/ counsel/urging) Jesus uses several parallels to follow the parable's logic. Jesus employs the rhetorical "argument from the lesser to the greater." The logic states if a friend is willing to arise at midnight to accommodate a neighbor, then how much more will God do to grant our petitions? As long as this entire text might be, and given all the moving parts in it, it is true that the prevailing concern focuses on prayer and how to pray. Thus for discipleship, we might argue that all gifts offered to God are gifts offered in prayer.

Of course, a careful reading reveals that in the final section of the lectionary text, Jesus changes the metaphor slightly from the parable's "friend" to images regarding what parents want to offer their children. Perhaps Jesus' point is two-fold. First, because God has forgiven us, we now are free to forgive others. Second as God gives to us we now are free to give on the behalf of others. Too often, however, both forgiveness and discipleship take on a "you scratch my back and I'll scratch your back" flavor. We think, "I'll forgive others God if you first forgive me." At best it is a kind of bartering prayer for forgiveness with God and, at worst, it looks similar to a calculated bribe.

Here is an amusing example of this self-serving mentality in a woman's love letter to her former fiancée. Yet, recently she experienced a steadfast change of heart:

Dear Tommy:

Can you ever forgive me? No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could every take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you! I love you! I love you!

Yours forever, Marie

P. S. And congratulations on winning the state lottery (James W. Moore, *Healing Where It Hurts*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993 p. 81)!

Authentic prayer is the source for forgiveness and giving. We do not forgive to gain God's mercy. We do not give to obtain God's blessings. We receive God's mercy and God's forgiveness which then frees us to forgive. Likewise we give because God has given to us beyond our grasp. God's act of forgiving us and giving to us is always a prior act. An authentic link to God begins and ends in prayer. Prayer spiritually prepares disciples to do for others what God has done for us. Giving and forgiving are among the most difficult things our faith asks of us. In prayer perhaps we prevail over these obstacles.

This text could fool us into thinking it is about giving one friend some bread for another friend. But if we look at the three parts of the lesson I read—all 13 verses—you might see an “A-B-A” pattern with prayer being the content of the first and third sections. These sections sandwich the parable called “The Friend at Midnight.” If we only paid heed to the parable then we could see a lesson about getting up in the middle of the night and helping a neighbor. Nonetheless the context clearly shows this teaching is about prayer. Yet, this is the only instance in the four Gospels in which the disciples ask Jesus to teach them anything—odd in that “Rabbi” means teacher. The whole scene begins because a disciple asked, “Lord, teach us to pray . . . .”

I expect I disappoint some when I tell you this lesson was not about risk-taking mission and service. We want to be active, take control, and do something. And honestly, to many modern people spirituality and prayer seem kind of wimpy and powerless. We like power—take charge—take action—make waves and make a difference. But prayer . . . ? I hear people use the phrases

“being immersed in prayer” and “prayer warrior” and I think of phrases like:

- the “still small voice” within (1 Kings 19:12)
- connect to your inner divinity
- be led in everyday life by Spirit
- genuine spiritual discernment
- cradled in divine love as a child
- transforming your life by spiritual healing
- becoming a body of light

Achieving spiritual enlightenment (See: [www.divinerevelation.org/Tetons.html](http://www.divinerevelation.org/Tetons.html)).

Yet if we follow the logic of Jesus' parable we get a different notion of prayer than the pious devout praying for an assortment of wants and desires. Note Jesus' parable and how it depicts prayer. Hospitality is paramount in the Middle East. The parable depicts one friend needing bread for a visiting friend who arrives at midnight. So he goes to his friend the neighbor and asks for three loaves.

The quandary in the parable is that the friend with the bread has already retired for the night and the whole family is in bed asleep. He does not want to wake the entire household, so he says, "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." If you think this is a rickety excuse remember the difficulty in getting children to go to sleep. Why couldn't the neighbor either ignore conventional hospitality until the morning; or at least come earlier before Junior and his sister were down for the night?

Even today Middle-Eastern families apply such sleeping arrangements and the man with the hungry friend sitting at his kitchen table is not easily put off. He simply keeps knocking on his neighbor's door. Beating—beating—beating! Similar to the persistent widow who seeks justice from a corrupt judge (Luke 18:1-8); the friend knocking displays a spirit of "continually coming." The judge and the friend in bed with the children simply wilts and finally gives up. This is what prayer looks like?

We think of prayer as sweet, well spoken words addressed to God to do our will. When Jesus speaks of prayer he suggests what Fred Craddock describes in a sermon titled: "Praying through Clenched Teeth." Prayer is not so much prayer retreats, meditation, the lotus position, or having proper words or posture. No, according to Jesus prayer is more like beating on heaven's door until someone answers. It is prayer that is so persistent that even the most reluctant finally

surrenders because he or she knows the one knocking is certainly not going to give up!

Thus today we have two surprises. First our lesson from the parable of the Friend at Midnight is not about Risk-taking Mission and Service, but rather about prayer. Second, although most of our mental imagery about prayer is along the order of “every head bowed, every eye closed,” Jesus here teaches us that prayer is more like an assault by the ATF on an apartment of weapons dealers. Maybe it is good to be surprised when we come to church—for possibly there is much for us to learn.

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