

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 24 2022

Luke 11:1-13

What are the earliest prayers you can remember praying?

Bedtime prayers?

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I die before I wake. I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless, Mommy, and Daddy, and Kathy and Grandma and Grandpa, and Nana and Papa, and my friend Bryant. Amen.

Mealtime prayers?

Come Lord Jesus be our guest and let these gifts to us be blest. Amen.

I cannot remember a time in my life growing up when our family didn't do both bedtime and meal prayers. It was a natural and normal part of our life to take time before important things (including going on a trip) to pray- to talk to God and give thanks, ask for protection, ask for help.

This was my basic training for prayer. I got my advanced training on praying at the feet of my mother. We watched religious programming on TV when I was little, the *PTL Club* and other programs where they were always praying out loud, often very emotionally. I saw my mother in personal prayer at all times and places. With people and alone. It was from watching her and my father, from going to worship and children's education at our church, St. Mark's Lutheran in Charlotte, NC and listening and participating in the prayers there from the time I could fold my hands and bow my head, that I learned something about how you pray.

To my young mind, it was remarkably like talking to someone you knew, maybe a parent or other adult. Someone with some power and authority, who you respected, maybe were a little bit intimidated by, but who was also kindly and approachable.

While I learned a lot about prayer and how to do it from my mother and my early and often experiences in childhood, the reality is that what I learned most through that experience was who God was. God was someone my mother went to when she was troubled or hurting. Wow! To my young mind, God must be pretty important and powerful for Mom to turn to for help. God would listen, to anything you say or ask. At the very least, God would make you feel better, even if the thing bothering you didn't magically go away; like mom kissing a scraped knee- it felt better but still had to heal. God might even respond to your prayer in a way that you could not imagine!

The text we have today has some different parts and can be somewhat confusing or challenging to read. But I wonder if the most important thing in all of them, what ties them together, is what they teach us about who God is. For more than anything, prayer is about being in relationship with God. Being invited into a personal communion with the divine. As writer Anne Lamott puts it, "Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence ...". Bishop Michael Rinehart who wrote our Lenten Study Book *Learning How to Pray Again* would agree, prayer is not primarily about what we get from God, but about our relationship with God.

So, what is the character of this God to whom we pray? Is God like a divine Amazon fulfilling requests for items to improve our lives? Quick delivery with Divine Prime! Is God a stickler for the rules, only answering prayers that are prayed in the right way by the right people? Is God like a fickle ruler, granting petitions or dispensing pain based on God's whims?

The God I find in scripture and that I have encountered in my own fifty-one years of life is nothing like that. This is a God who from the beginning of creation desires to be in relationship with us- God's beloved creation. Who was so close to human beings he would walk the Garden with them. God desires to be in conversation with us- to hear our dreams, hopes, and fears. God invites and desires for folks to Ask, Seek, Knock. To approach God again and again and again. This is a God who has an open-door policy, twenty-four/seven. Who wants to hear from us because God loves the sound of our voice.

We can read the section inviting us to ask, search, and knock as one that promises we will get whatever we ask for. Those who preach the Prosperity Gospel believe this; Just ask God for good things, believe it is so, and it will happen. Yet, each of us, I'm sure, has occasion to know this is not true. We have asked for things, even good things - for others, for ourselves, that have not happened. Certainly not on our timeframe. We could, sometimes reasonably, explain why this is so. I've even done this myself.

But I wonder if the better thing is to let God defend Godself and return to the point of the text. To what we know from the witness of scripture and Jesus, God's own Son. That God is the one whom you can keep coming back to, time and again, and God will listen to you. God is the one who you can hold to account for

who God is. This is what Abraham is doing in the first reading, “Far be it from you to slay the righteous with the wicked!” That’s not who you are God! You are gracious and merciful. Look at the Psalms. Time and again these prayers (for that is what these songs are/ prayers of the authors) call God to account for who God is. To say, “Hey God, this is who you said you were...well get to being that!” “You said you protect your people, well...I need some protecting!”

There are two things at work here. First, the psalmists and Abraham knows who God is because they’ve been in conversation with God a long time. Abraham can not only point out when other people get God wrong but can also point out to God when things are out of character. Second, what does it say about our God that we can speak this way to God and still God promises to listen, to hear, to act, to be faithful to us? What does it say that our God is one who will wrestle with us, as Jacob does by the river? What does it say that our God listens and responds to Job’s complaint?

But the only way to get into this kind of relationship is to be in conversation with God. Regularly. Think of your best friend. How many conversations have you had with them over the years to get to the point where you know what each other is thinking and feeling? How many deep and meaningful as well as simple and functional exchanges?

It is the same with God. God wants to hear from you- so whether you have been in conversation with God for years or haven’t spoken in a while, I would invite you to practice prayer more. Use the Lord’s Prayer as a starting point if that helps, or just talk with your Abba, your Daddy about your hopes and dreams, your fears and sorrows, what makes you angry and what are your deepest desires. About

people and places that need God's mercy and grace. About those who you know who are in need of healing in mind, body, and spirit. And then listen. Listen for God's response. Because God does talk back.

Not always in a booming voice from the clouds or even a still small voice in your mind. But sometimes through the voice of friends, family, or a stranger. Through circumstances that happen. God, after all, often uses us to provide daily bread for others.

But if you enter into this prayerful conversation, God will give you good gifts. Not necessarily what you ask for because your test score is more dependent on how much you studied rather than divine intervention. But the gifts of being in relationship with God. The ones we heard about from Paul several weeks ago. Things like- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Gifts that no one and nothing can take from you.

Thanks be to God.