



“Got a Prayer”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

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Luke 11:1-13 (NRSV)***

Today’s gospel reading appears on first blush to be a Q&A session between Jesus and the disciples about prayer—and it is—but the timeline for this session most likely stretched over several months, rather than a few hours as we may be led to believe by Luke, who presents this conversation in a jam-packed series of events in chapter 11.

I think it’s helpful to take a step back from passages like today’s lesson, and notice how they’re constructed. Notice, for example, that today’s gospel reading is more of a collection of Jesus’ teachings about prayer, more than a verbatim of a single seminar on the topic.

What we have before us is actually an encapsulation of an ongoing conversation between Jesus and the disciples that provides insights into the spiritual journeys of his first followers—which not only makes them seem more human, but which also validates and informs our modern struggles with prayer.

II

Prayer. Ponder the topic for a moment.

When you hear the word “prayer,” do certain thoughts or feelings well up in your head or heart? If so, what are they? Take time to notice them. Notice your thoughts and feelings about prayer.

What have you learned about prayer in your lifetime? What have you learned about prayer from your family of origin, from the church of your childhood (if you had one), and from others that have been your spiritual companions along life’s way?

What are your prayer-practices—some call them spiritual disciplines—that you maintain to this day? Do you (think) you have any? If so, are they nourishing, frustrating, or a jumble of both?

Do you feel that there are right and wrong answers to my questions about prayer? I hope not. In my view, your and my answers are simply the answers we have for today. It's OK not to have sure-fire answers to any of these questions, and it's OK if our views change over time, and OK if your views are different than mine.

Regardless of what we think about prayer or how we feel about the practice of prayer, our wellbeing is enhanced by our efforts to ponder the meaning and place of prayer in our lives.

III

Our individual answers to the questions I've posed about prayer likely vary depending on things like the type of instruction that we may have received about prayer, what type of prayer practices we have participated in, and which of these practices have (and haven't) been nourishing for us.

Like many of you, Marlene and I learned about prayer in our childhood home, from our family, and from our Sunday School and church camp experiences. Some of my earliest memories of prayer include bed time prayers ("Now I lay me down to sleep..."), meal-time prayers ("Come Lord Jesus, be our guest..."), and the Lord's Prayer, which we said in Sunday School and during worship, in addition to extemporaneous group prayers and other formulaic prayers that we participated in and learned along the way.

Today's gospel reading brought to mind early childhood memories of prayer for me. I remember, for example, our first day of Church School circa August 1967. I remember that our mother dressed us in matching red plaid cotton dresses, white tights, and black patent leather shoes. We had matching patent leather purses into which we placed our offering coins wrapped in a Kleenex tissue, so that we wouldn't lose these treasures on the way to church.

Marlene and I were escorted to Sunday School by our parents, introduced to the teachers and to a few students, and then plopped in the back row of a miniature children's church where our parents' parting words to us were about sitting still, minding the teachers, and trusting that they would be back to get us after class.

As we waited for morning devotions to commence, Marlene and I sat in the back row holding hands, swinging our Mary Jane's back and forth.

I have little memory of the content of opening devotions, or specific lessons learned in the Kindergarten class, but I do recall that the focal point of our children's worship space was a small altar with a gold cross on it, behind which hung an illuminated stained glass window box with a picture of Jesus knocking at the door of our hearts—a picture that was inspired by today's gospel reading about prayer. "...Ask, and it will be given 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."

IV

Think about that verse for a moment. Jesus is talking to the disciples. He makes prayer sound pretty easy, doesn't he? Like it's a no-brainer, don't you think?

Ask. Seek. Knock.

Answer. Find. Open.

Prayer sounds pretty easy, yet the disciples didn't find it so easy, and truth be told, it's not easy all of the time for us either.

There are many people whom I've encountered over two decades in ministry, who I suspect would have benefited from reading or hearing a little more about the disciples' struggles with prayer and other faith life issues.

For those among us today who have struggled with or in prayer—be that a bleep in an otherwise fulfilling spiritual life to wondering if we've quite literally "got a prayer" or could ever get one—I think that the larger story behind today's text may well be transformative for us. In that spirit, let's dive into the text.

Luke 11 opens with an assumption that Jesus' own life of prayer was so compelling that the disciples wanted to follow his example, but that they were repeatedly stymied in their earnest efforts to do so. At least some of the disciples, like some of us, didn't think that they "had a prayer," literally or figuratively.

They told Jesus that they didn't have the right words or the proper form for prayer, so he offered them what we now call "the Lord's Prayer." This prayer was probably never intended to be received as the last word on prayer, or the best prayer, but instead a prayer that Jesus hoped would give the disciples a starting place. So he said, when you pray, pray *like* this, "Abba, Father, who art in heaven..."

The Lord's Prayer is followed by a story about a man who went to a friend's home in the night asking for bread. In the story, the caller annoys his friend so much that the homeowner finally shares bread with the caller—not so much because the two were friends, according to Luke, but because the caller was so persistent in his request.

The third move in today's passage is a brief parable that takes listeners beyond a mere understanding of God as a friend who responds to persistent prayer, regardless of the petitioner's goodness or worthiness, and reassures audiences (including us) that God answers prayer because God is good.

The parable goes like this: "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask...!"

So you see, when we give a passage like Luke 11 a close read, we make interesting discoveries literarily about the passage, but that is not all. We also begin to sense how

literary structure influences how we receive a biblical passage, and in turn, how that reception of the story influences our spiritual lives.

V

To go deeper, let us notice that there are not only three exchanges between Jesus and the disciples about prayer in this passage, but also that they are compressed into a single paragraph *and* that Luke's compressing of the dialogue minimizes the very real sense of ambiguity and struggle that the disciples were experiencing in their prayer lives.

The "up side" of this compressing is that Jesus' teachings about prayer seem more coherent and convincing. Jesus assures his followers that prayer is central to the life of faith. He assures them that God hears and answers prayers. And he assures them that God's hearing and answering of prayer is not dependent upon their worthiness, but on God's grace, love, and mercy.

The "down side" of this compressing is that it minimizes the very real experiences that people of faith, including the disciples, normally encounter in life, and consequently, may cause us to miss the sense of validation that could come from a more candid account of the disciples' struggle.

VI

If today's sermon has tapped your interest in the topic of prayer, I encourage you to avail yourselves of resources here at Eden and take this sermon as an invitation to explore prayer in new and deeper ways. The examples that Mark, Brenda, and I shared with the children are just a few of the prayer practices that you may wish to explore. We are also here to pray and consult with you.

Mark would love to make music or art with you. Both Brenda and Mark and others in the congregation are journalers. I'm sure that they could help others get started. We are also here to help if you're feeling stuck, or if you would find it helpful to share discoveries that may have surfaced in this or other practices for you.

Brenda would be happy to introduce you to the labyrinth, either through a group or private experience, around prayer concerns that you may have.

I'm here for spiritual direction and pastoral counseling, to introduce you to a whole range of prayer practices. I'm also happy to help with referrals to other resource people in the area.

I also invite you to add a book or two to your summer reading list that may help nourish you on your spiritual journey. A few examples follow:

Parker J. Palmer, a Quaker theologian and prolific author, has written several books on the topic of Christian spirituality. Two favorites of mine are *Let Your Life Speak*, and *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. The former

deals with vocational discernment at mid-career, and the latter introduces a practice known as “the circle of trust,” or what Quakers call “a clearness committee,” as a means for developing deep and authentic senses of community and for being more intentional in our spiritual discernment processes.

If you’re a person who has found prayer difficult, or if you have or are now experiencing some barrier in your prayer life, a book by Ann and Barry Ulanov called *Primary Speech: a Psychology of Prayer* may be helpful to you. Ann Ulanov is Professor of Psychiatry and Religion at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and her late husband, Barry Ulanov, was Professor of English at Barnard College and a lecturer at Union Seminary. The Ulanovs’ premise is that God desires for us to bring our whole lives and our whole selves into prayer. Contrary to the ascetics and medieval mystics who cultivated spiritual practices that rejected the physical world, human relationships, and the full range of human thought and emotion, the Ulanovs assure readers that God wants us to bring our whole selves in prayer, and that when we do, we become more attuned with the divine and more able to embrace ambiguity and achieve a sense of wholeness in our lives.

A third resource that you may wish to consider is a book that our Religious Education and Spiritual Life Task Team members are reading called *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives*. The author is Karen Marie Yust, an ordained UCC and Disciples of Christ pastor, a mother of three, and a seminary professor. Yust teaches Christian education and spiritual formation at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Our task team would love to have others join us in reading *Real Kids, Real Faith*, and participate in side-bar conversations about the book and our Task Team conversations. Task Team members include: Patty Cowick, Brenda Loreman, Jeanne Strauss, Cheryl Fields Tyler, Mark Unbehagen, and me.

VII

In closing, I hope that today’s sermon has provided an opportunity to reflect on our own prayer lives, to help us continue any soul-healing that we may need, to remove a barrier or two that we may have encountered in our prayer lives, to point us to some new resources for spiritual growth, and to offer a guide post for where we may need to go from here. It’s not my place to tell you what your prayer life needs to be about or what form it needs to take. That’s your work. I can, however, encourage you on the journey, as you encourage me. And, together, with God’s help, we will be blessed and we will be a blessing to each other. Thanks be to God. Amen.