

Jesus Teaches Us to Pray
Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by the Rev. Tom Pumphrey, July 24, 2016
Proper 12, Year C, Luke 11:1-13

Luke 11:1-13 (NRSV): *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." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. 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 because he is his friend, 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 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 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 Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

They say that New York City taxicab drivers have a greater place in heaven than most parish priests. Why? Well, folks are known to fall asleep in church on occasion, but no one falls asleep in a New York taxicab—and they are praying fervently the whole time! We pray for many different reasons. Sometimes we find ourselves in a taxicab near death experience. Sometimes we face a tough decision. Sometimes we overflow with joy at a gathering of family and friends. Occasionally, we don't quite know how to pray. Prayer is an intimate experience, and we are still learning to know God.

Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray. That might seem odd, since these were godly men already. But we can always learn and grow in prayer, just as we can always learn and grow in any relationship. Prayer is communication. A marriage without communication starts to suffer. But when a couple goes out on dates and feeds their relationship with communication, they learn to thrive and grow together. So it is with our relationship with God. Prayer is the lifeblood of a relationship with God. We can be intentional about prayer, and intentional about different kinds of communication, bringing ourselves to God more openly and honestly each day.

There are some basics of prayer that are helpful as we learn. First of all, when you pray, address God directly. Often I hear people pray like this: they say "I pray for Bob and I pray for Sue..." But that's sort of like me saying to someone, "Dave, I talk to you about Bob and I talk to you about Sue..." Go ahead and address God directly and, if you want something from God, be clear about what you want. "God, please heal Bob from his pneumonia, and thank you, God, for helping Sue make it through college."

Prayer is a unique kind of conversation, but when we acknowledge that it is a conversation, we open ourselves to God more effectively. Think of a conversation between a woman named Sally

and her Uncle Jim. Her Uncle Jim has been a mentor for Sally, and she has come to value their time together. Here's what Sally says when she visits her uncle.

She runs up to him and embraces him and says "Hi, Uncle Jim! How are you, I'm so thrilled to see you! You are so special! Thank you so much for being here for me. I remember when we went on that trip together last year—could we do that again soon? You were so generous to help me find a job. I'm so sorry that I turned down your advice for so long, please forgive me. You know, I have a friend who just lost his job; would you speak with him and help him? You are so wise about these things, and he really needs you. If you want, I could spend some time with him this weekend and I'll share with him what you taught me. Let me tell you about what is going on in my life." And when Sally shares what's going on, she asks him—"what do you think?" And Uncle Jim responds to her and they spend time together, eventually just sitting on his front porch together in silence, enjoying each other's company.

Sally's approach to her uncle is a lot like our approach can be with God in prayer. We are helped by the practice of reverence with God, especially as we gather to celebrate the sacraments on Sundays. But our reverence should also have intimacy in it—closeness and trust in God, the way a small child trusts his large and powerful parents. Sally has learned to respect her uncle, and she has also learned to love him. So she comes to him with respect and with love and joy.

Each of Sally's expressions is like a different kind of prayer. First of all, she addresses her uncle by name, and she praises him "Hi, Uncle Jim!" she says, "How are you, I'm so thrilled to see you, you are so special!" Jesus teaches something similar to his disciples. They address God as Father, and they say "hallowed be your name." This means "may your name be holy" or "your name is holy." Sally starts off naming her uncle, and praising him, calling him special. Praise is a different kind of prayer than thanksgiving. Sally thanks her uncle for being there for her—she's thanking him for something he has done for her. Praise, on the other hand, isn't about what Uncle Jim has done, but about who he is—about an admirable attribute that he has. In this case, she says "you are so special!" In the Lord's prayer, we honor the holiness of God's name, and the coming of his heavenly kingdom.

Then Sally tells her uncle "I remember when we went on that trip together last year." This is called a remembrance. The Gospel according to Matthew records a longer version of the Lord's Prayer, including "may your kingdom come, and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In this prayer, we praise God and we remember something about what God has done. You see this remembrance in several prayers of the church, including the Eucharistic prayer, where we remember what God has done in Jesus Christ. We call to mind how God has acted in the past before we ask God to act in a similar way in the future.

Sally then asks a similar request: "can we go on a trip again soon?" This is a petition—a prayer that asks something for yourself. We ask for God's direction or God's healing for ourselves, or for wisdom or emotional strength, or for relief from our adversaries. This is a prayer of petition, a request like "give us this day our daily bread."

Then Sally remembers her Uncle's help, but she also remembers how she rejected that help for so long. She expresses her remorse for rejecting him, and she seeks renewal in their relationship and shows that she is headed in a new direction in her life. This is the prayer of penitence. It starts with honest confession about what we have done. In true confession, there is no dodging the blame or excuse making. We take responsibility for ourselves. Repentance is the next step: going in a new direction, and returning to God as Sally has returned to her uncle. We pray with penitence when we ask "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Then Sally asks a favor from her uncle to help a friend find a job. This is similar to petition: Sally is asking her Uncle to do something. But in this case, it is not for herself, but for someone else. The distinction can be helpful in our prayers. So often we only pray for our own needs, but we forget to pray for the needs of others. This kind of prayer is called intercession. We ask God to heal loved ones, or to protect someone in danger, to challenge someone making mistakes, or to provide for someone in need.

Sally cares enough about her friend to enlist her uncle's help. She even offers to share with her friend what her uncle has taught her. This is the prayer of oblation—offering ourselves in service to God.

Then Sally goes on to share with her uncle what is going on in her life. She opens up with her joys and her sorrows, her questions and her successes. Jesus teaches his disciples to be persistent in prayer, and in his parables, and in his example in the wilderness and in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus shows us the value of sharing our heart and our life with our heavenly Father. Then, when Sally is done sharing, she makes a crucial step in her relationship with her uncle: she asks for his response, and she listens!

We bring so much to God, but a crucial step in this process is listening. We listen to God in silence. We listen to God in reading scripture. We listen to God in the voice of other Christians as we pray and read scripture together. Listening to God is a vital step in the life of prayer.

When Sally has shared and listened to her uncle, then they simply sit together on his porch in silence, enjoying each other's company. In all our prayers with God, we do well to preserve time simply to rest in God's presence, feeling the peace that passes understanding. For though we know something about God, God is ultimately beyond our understanding, and often our prayers are beyond our ability to express in words. This is a primary goal of contemplative prayer: the prayer of Adoration, adoring God who is beyond us, yet who reaches out to us to be close with us. Adoration expresses the mysterious bonds of love and affection from deep in our hearts, like the prayer of music and laughter.

Now, in all this story about what Sally said to Uncle Jim, I've skipped over the parts where Uncle Jim responds to her. You can tell from her words something about who he is to her. He seems to remind me a little of who God is to us. He helped her when she needed him. He

continued to be there for her when she rejected him, and he was there when she returned. He is generous to her, and she can trust him completely. He helps her to understand her world, and he empowers her to learn and grow and follow his advice. Uncle Jim gives Sally joy!—so much joy that she wants to share her uncle with others who need him!

Jesus promises us that God will respond when we pray—and that we can trust God to respond with blessing and not a curse. I've heard it said that God answers prayer in one of three ways: either "yes," "no," or "wait." You can tell what the hardest answer is, can't you! God is not a magic hat or a heavenly vending machine (you know: insert the right prayers and the answer comes rolling out). But God does answer prayer. In a relationship with God in prayer, God changes us. We see God's hand at work in the world around us. Even an answer of "no" or "wait" takes on beauty and blessing when it comes from God who cares for us—and who cares for others through us. This is why Jesus calls us to persist in prayer. Not because he wants us to nag God, but because in our persistence we stay in relationship with God. And God changes our lives when we stay in relationship with him—even in tough times.

Jesus teaches us to pray. Jesus calls us to pray because God is ready to respond to us when we seek him.

If we can find joy in our earthly relationships, how much more joy will we find with God when we pray!