

Sermon *Living In a Spirit of Prayer* Luke 11:1-13 Sunday July 29 2007

Our scripture today is about prayer. But it's not just about a prayer, The Lord's Prayer—although this prayer is so universal that it's been said even pastors who visit patients with Alzheimer's disease frequently report that when such patients seem to exhibit no awareness or understanding of what is going on at the moment, they immediately join in and pray aloud with the minister when those familiar words are heard, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name."

If we look closely, Jesus' words in this scripture are more about *how to live in prayer*, than about particular words to say. The Lord's Prayer is basically an outline of *how to live*: 1. Acknowledge God. 2. Ask God to come to you (Thy Kingdome Come); be in my world. 3. Ask God to meet your daily needs (although in our abundances we're far more inclined to thank God for already doing just that). 4. Forgive as we are forgiven. 5. And finally, seek God's guidance. It's simply an all-inclusive, non-specific prayer of life. Jesus was showing us how to live in prayer.

Several years ago when I preached on this passage I shared with you an interesting perspective some scholars believe: that the request from the disciples, asking "Lord, teach us to pray as John the Baptist taught his disciples," was more so an inquiry (once again) of the disciples seeking ways to be special in Jesus' close-nit group—like the Baptist's disciples were—than it was the disciples seeing how meaningful prayer was to Jesus or how God works in one's life through prayer.

It's true; the disciples were somewhat notorious in seeking Jesus' affections, wanting to know who's greatest amongst them, and fighting for the royal seat next to him in Heaven. It makes perfect sense that to have a prayer that no one else had would definitely be a motivating factor for them to ask "Lord, teach us to pray." Of course Jesus obliges them with the ability to turn their request of specialness into a means of humility. In asking God for "Thy will be done" you're pretty much asking for *your will* to be abandoned and therefore *allowing* the bringing of God into your deepest needs and most perplexing problems, and waiting there for light and strength. It's total humility because the prayer is seeking an *effect* of complete dependence, not so much upon what we do, as upon what we permit *God* to do in us and through us. That's the work of the prayer. Again, the Lord's Prayer is

meant to be a way of life, where we're allowing God to have God's way with us.

Furthermore, given that this is the only prayer Jesus taught, one would reason that it must **be quite a prayer!** Again, it's not just a prayer about how to ask for something, but it's a prayer about how *to live!* But to live this kind of total dependence-prayer is not easy for us. Prayer so often to us means asking for something, and for that reason alone, we may hesitate to pray. It's almost always because we feel we're unworthy of having it (whatever "it" is); and then we couple it with the notion that we don't want to bother God—just like we might not want to bother a friend or neighbor for something we need.

Bill Keane, who draws the popular Family Circus cartoons, portrays a father who is fast asleep on the living room couch, his back facing outward and his face buried in the pillows. Anticipating being bothered by his little boy about who-knows-what, this father has cleverly pinned a paper sign across his back that reads, "Go ask Mommy." The little tyke, unable to read, does just what his dad hopes he won't do: he tugs and tugs at his dad's shirt, asking the question, "What does that sign say, Daddy?"

Maybe this example speaks for all the times *we don't* want to be bothered, and likewise, we think God doesn't want to be bothered either. I don't know...sometimes we just have to stoke up enough nerve to ask someone for a favor even though we find it tough. We even find it tough to ask for someone to pass the mash potatoes at a dinner table! We are so inclined to hesitate when it comes to asking favors of others, even small ones, and likewise we pass that hesitation onto God. Fortunately, in the second part of today's gospel story Jesus wants to assure us that we have permission to pray! More than that, he's telling us that it's okay to "bother" God, even stir-up God, if need be, when we come to God in prayer.

Therefore, Jesus tells this charming parable to make this point. A man receives a surprise visitor at midnight. The person needs a place to lodge overnight. In Jesus times when this story was told, the average citizen viewed their duty in such a situation as being fairly undeniable—you had to take the guy in. Since people avoided traveling in the heat of the day; sometimes they wouldn't reach a feasible place to stop until late in the evening. The man *had to* receive his surprise visitor...only the most hardened soul would have the heart to turn down a friend under such

circumstances. So the friend is invited in, but the host has no food to offer. So the host knocks on the door of *his* neighbor/friend, asking for some bread. The neighbor/friend turns down the request of providing bread at this hour. Again, we have to appreciate the context of the times. Both were probably modest homes. These homes usually had only one large room, multipurpose in use. When the daytime activities of the family were concluded, the living area was recycled into a sleeping area for everyone. During the daytime the single door into the home stood open, signaling to visitors that they were welcome, for the room had not yet been rearranged for sleeping. But once the room was prepared for bedtime, the door was shut, meaning that everyone in the house was now settled for the night in tight quarters. To fumble about and prepare three loaves of bread in such limited space would probably mean waking up the whole crew of children, thus upsetting the household for the rest of the night.

So it's from this context that the neighbor answers the embarrassed host, "Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything" (v. 7). But here we have a host who is so desperate that the commonly accepted closed-door signal means nothing to him. He knocks and knocks, again and again—"*knock and the door shall be opened, seek and you shall find.*" It's now when Jesus comments about how this petitioner's persistence will eventually press the neighbor until he gives in and shells out the bread. Jesus further comments that the same kind of persistence in prayer is admirable.

So why should we dare to be so persistent in our prayers? Why should we go to such lengths of "stirring up" God, as this man in the story stirred up his neighbor and friend at midnight? Because God is on our side; God has our needs at heart. God understands the predicaments of life; **and because a life without persistent prayer is a life of sacrifice!** *We're not called to live a life of sacrifice—Jesus took care of that—we're called to a life of love and abundance* (through consistent forgiveness), but we don't allow it for ourselves. Too often we're afraid to pray, afraid to surrender the situation to God because we believe that if we did that, we'll have to sacrifice something, when the truth is, *not* surrendering...*not* saying, "Thy Will be done" **that's** the life of sacrifice.

Hanging on to anything we think we can take care of without God's guidance is to choose to live a life of sacrifice. It's a control issue—we don't like to give up control. The problem is, we're not created to *be* in

control, we're created to be a vessel, a catalyst, for the Living God to flow through in order to *bring us into harmony with God's own purpose—again*, God's purpose is not a purpose **of** sacrifice, sacrifice is what happens when we don't let go and let God.

For example: Once when Jesus, Peter, James, and John returned from being away for a few days, they found the other disciples frustrated with their ineffectiveness. A father had brought a son who was in bondage to sickness and asked the disciples to heal the boy. They could not. When Jesus arrived on the scene the father turned immediately to him, and Jesus healed the child. Then the disciples asked, "Why could we not help the child?" Jesus replied, "This kind of healing takes place only after much prayer" (Matthew 17:14-21).

The disciples discovered that through prayer, God gave them great power to help others. For example, after Jesus had risen from the dead and ascended to the Father, Peter, the leader of the early church, was taken prisoner by King Herod. Herod intended to kill Peter. The disciples did not have the fire power to rescue Peter from prison, but by now they had the prayer power. While they met in a home and prayed, scripture says an angel came and released Peter from prison, and Peter came to the very house where they were praying (see Acts 12:1-17). From the very beginning the church learned that if you want to help someone, pray for them.

But we don't have to turn only to the disciples and Biblical examples of how prayer changes lives. Our Still Speaking God works through our prayers here and now.

Several years ago, a young pastor visited in the home of one of the young couples in his church. At the close of the visit he asked if he could read the Scriptures and have a prayer. When they responded in the affirmative, he asked if there was anything in particular that they would like to have included in the prayer. The young wife responded, "Please pray that we will be able to adopt a child. We have been on the waiting list for a long time." He then asked if they had found it impossible to have children of their own. They shared how they had been to several doctors to seek help so that they could have children. All efforts had come to nothing. Now they were both frustrated, because it looked like even their efforts for adoption might fail. When the pastor prayed, he asked for the Lord to give this couple a child. He asked the Lord to find a child who needed them as adoptive parents. He also

included in the prayer that the parents really wanted to have their own child. After he prayed that simple prayer, he never thought of the prayer again until about four months later. It was Sunday morning. They had just finished the worship service. As they left the sanctuary, the wife whispered to the young pastor, "We are going to have a baby."

Less than one year later, the pastor had the privilege of baptizing Michael at the altar of the church. About a month later, as the couple was leaving the sanctuary, the wife whispered in the pastor's ear, "Stop praying." They were expecting another child. One year later, as he baptized little Charles, the pastor shared with the congregation how God had answered prayers for this young couple. Then he closed the baptismal service by saying, "Every time I see little Charles I am reminded that the Lord gives us twice as much as we ask." (No sacrifice there!) If you really want to help someone, pray for them.

When Mother Teresa appeared on a popular television program, she was reminded by the host, that the show was being carried all over America and in 22 foreign countries including her native Yugoslavia. The host asked her if there was one message that she would like to convey to all those viewers. Her response was, "Yes, tell them to pray. And tell them to teach their children to pray."

A nationally known minister of the Gospel was involved in a question/answer session. He was on stage with several prominent church leaders in front of a large audience made up of pastors and lay persons. The minister had just responded to a question from one of the other leaders on the panel when he was shocked to see someone rise in the audience. The person who stood up seemed to be out of place. Actually this person was a friend from the minister's past whom he had not seen since he had professed his faith in Christ and had entered the ministry. This friend had never seen the man on stage or in a church as a Christian minister. They had been old drinking buddies and their past activities had not been something that either one could be proud of.

When the minister's friend from the past was recognized, the old friend came straight to the point. He asked the minister on stage, "Could you tell us what made you become a Christian, and then a minister. I knew you as a young man. There was not a clue in you that would have made me believe that you would ever be doing what you are doing today. What changed

you?"

The minister responded, "Hello Joe, It is good to see you, and it has been a long time. I am glad you are here. The answer to your question is Jesus Christ that's who and what changed me."

Joe followed by asking, "If Jesus Christ changed you, how did it happen? How did he get your attention?"

The minister responded, "He got my attention through my wife."

Joe then said, "In the past you seemed to go your own way without any real concern for what she wanted. I would like to know what she said that caused you to be open to Jesus Christ."

"It was not what she said, it was what she did," replied the minister.

Joe laughed, "What in the world could she have done to make you change?"

The minister responded, "Do you remember how I would stay out late at night drinking? Then I would try to slip into the house without her knowing when I came in. It never did work. When I would see her, I would be either ashamed or very angry. I always expected her to yell at me and cry, but she never did. When she would hear me come into the house, she would always get up and get on her knees by the bed. She would stay on her knees until I got into the bed. She kept praying and praying for me. God used her to open my heart and mind to Jesus. A tough man can cope with a nagging wife, but a praying wife will get you every time."

"A praying wife . . ." Of course this could have said a praying husband or a praying parent or a praying friend. If you really want to help someone, spend more time praying for them. If you find yourself criticizing someone or something, pray for them, pray for the situation...pray. We're created to Live In a Spirit of Prayer, and there is great power in that prayer. And in today's teaching of the Lord's Prayer we can understand that Jesus is asking us to make an art out of prayer, by Living **In** a Spirit of Prayer, always, knowing that in every moment a loving God—Our Father Who Art In Heaven—is on your side.

To close today's message I invite us to bow our heads in prayer. Together let's recognize that in this moment God can, through each of us, give great power to help someone else. Think of someone right now. Eyes closed, picture that person standing before you. If that person is disabled, whether spiritually, physically, emotionally, picture them standing before you healed. If that person is angry and unforgiving, picture them with joy on their face, forgiving joy. If that person is poor, picture that person sitting before a feast. If that person is lonely, picture that person surrounded by friends. If that person is lost, picture that person being brought home by Jesus to a celebration with family and friends. Now let's pray this simple prayer, as we picture these persons, "God bless you. God bless you. Thank you God for blessing them! Thank you.

And may God bless all of you too as we join voices in praying the prayer of life: Our Father...