



# Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

## *Why Pray*

by Rev. John Strommen on Luke 11:1-13

Sunday, July 28, 2019

Let's talk about prayer today. For some people, prayer means stringing together a bunch of religious words. When Clark Griswold was invited to say a prayer remembering a recently deceased relative, he struggled a little bit...

*(clip from "Vacation")*

"Cut me some slack, Ellen. I'm not an ordained minister." Had some religious words, but didn't quite hold together, did it?

### PRAYER IS NOT ABOUT MOAB LAYING US DOWN IN THE LAND OF THE CANAANITES

Well, the vast majority of people are not ordained ministers, so how are we supposed to pray?

We aren't the first ones to ask this question. The disciples asked Jesus how to pray, and what they got was a little bit of practical instruction – The Lord's Prayer - and a lot more on the trustworthiness of the character we pray to.

Jesus says begin with, "Father in heaven" – the most important teaching of this whole lesson; how our prayer is going to be framed: as a conversation with our loving father.

### PRAYER IS ABOUT: TALKING TO YOUR FATHER (PARENT) IN HEAVEN

So, in prayer we are not trying to summon an abstract, remote, disinterested being. God has created you, loves you, and desires an ongoing relationship and conversation with you. Just as you do with your own children, nieces, nephews or anyone you love deeply.

By the way, if you like, substitute mother for father. Same difference. Jesus' world was patriarchal and imagined God as a man. Obviously, God is not a man, but in this teaching, God is re-imagined as a parent, to whom we come as dependent children, addressing God as "Abba," father – an affectionate term used by a child addressing his/her "daddy."

"Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come." This tells us that prayer is, first, about God. Our parent, whose name is to be revered, who envisions and promises a

world for us where everyone's lives flourish. Therefore, one of the first things we do in prayer is get out of ourselves and align with a bigger picture: what God is doing in the world to give life.

#### ALIGNING OURSELVES WITH GOD'S VISION FOR US

Here we must note that prayer is inextricably fused to action. As an ancient understanding of prayer teaches us, praying for something commits us to join God in working to bring it about. Prayer is not sitting on our hands and waiting for God to do it. What action is God urging us to take here at Mt Carmel?

This, by the way, is the core work of the church: aligning ourselves with what God is up to in the world. That means asking the question often and then talking about it with God and each other. Most churches - ourselves included - don't devote much time to this sort of thing, and the result is institutional drift and decline.

Next, we get a series of petitions that shift things back *to us and our needs*.

#### BRINGING OUR NEEDS BEFORE GOD

"Give us our daily bread. Forgive us as we forgive others. Protect us from evil." In other words, "sustain us, renew us, protect us." This means that our needs matter to God, as a child's needs usually do to any loving parent. And like a child with a parent – but even more so – we are utterly dependent on God to provide for us. Prayer is putting into practice this dependence.

#### LEARNING TO BE DEPENDENT ON GOD TO PROVIDE

And then Luke does something interesting. He takes up the question, "but can we really trust God to provide, to respond to us if we pray?"

How many of you have wondered when you pray whether God will really answer your prayer? After all, sometimes it does seem like God is sleeping, or just doesn't care about little old you, or us. Or maybe everything is already determined, so of what utility is prayer? These questions and feelings can make it hard to know how, or whether to approach God.

So, the Gospel of Luke doubles down on the father/parent imagery. First, you get the story of the man in the middle of the night who knocks on his neighbor's door because he has late night visitors and no bread – a very big no-no in that world where hospitality was paramount. Had to have provisions at hand for travelers who might stop by. So, despite the fact that the neighbor whose door is knocked is already sleeping, and tells his neighbor to go away, persistence will pay off and that neighbor who came knocking will get some bread because he would not go away.

The point? Be persistent in prayer? Yes, but more importantly, this is a parable of contrast. If we can trust our cranky neighbor in the middle of the night to help us – and

usually we can, even if he is cranky – then how much more can we trust our father in heaven to respond to our needs? Unlike our neighbor, our God - our parent - wants us to come knocking in the middle of the night or any time.

And therefore, says Jesus, trust that if you seek, you will find. If you knock, the door will be opened. If you ask, it shall be given. After all, if a child asks for a fish, what father would give him a snake? Or if he asks for an egg, what father would give a scorpion? And if imperfect fathers in this world know how to give good gifts, imagine how much more your father in heaven will give to those who ask!

Jesus - and Luke - are stressing here that you can trust this God.

## LEARNING TO TRUST THAT GOD WILL PROVIDE EVEN BETTER THAN A GRUMPY NEIGHBOR

Which brings us to this question: why don't I always get what I pray for? Most of us have had the experience of praying many, many times for something we really wanted or felt we needed, but didn't get. How are we supposed to trust then?

Let me tell you a little story that gets at this question. When my oldest son, Thomas, was barely a year old, one day I was playing with him in our back yard. I noticed one of those baby toads, or maybe they're mini-toads, hopping around in the yard, so I pointed it out to Thomas. He seemed interested, so I picked it up in my hand to give him a closer look. Then I said, "here, Thomas, you can hold him." And I put it in his hand. He looked intently at it with his furrowed little brow, and then he started to put the little toady into his mouth.

"No, no, no!" I said, and quickly fished it out of his mouth before any damage could happen. I let the toad go and he happily sprang off, no doubt thankful that he didn't meet his end being munched on by a toddler. I realized that my little experiment to recreate the Discovery Channel had failed. I was thinking educationally, and Thomas was thinking, "Hey, I should put that in my mouth!"

## LEARNING TO AVOID CONSUMPTION OF LIVE TOADS

Now, as his father, I knew his mouth was not a good place for the toady, so I took it away before something unpleasant happened. While few of us are tempted to chomp on toads, nonetheless, as human beings we often do not have a clear sense of what is best for us. Our father in heaven does know what we need, and it may not be exactly what we asked for in prayer. Jesus today is asking you to trust that God cares about you as a father does his child and will only give good things to you. He will also step in and try to re-direct if we are about to eat a toad. So, when you pray for something and don't get it, trust that God is responding or will respond, but perhaps not in the way you're expecting. What you *find* may not be exactly what you *sought*.

For instance, when my younger brother Dave was in high school, he was a basketball player just like all his older brothers had been at Richfield High School. When he was a senior, he prayed all the time that he would be a starter on the varsity team - or at least play a lot - but it became increasingly clear during early practices that he would not play much. So, that door having been shut, he decided to look for another one. He quit the team and tried out for a musical production. He got the lead in *The Fantastiks* and it turned out that while he was merely a competent basketball player, he was quite a good actor and singer. So, he didn't get the thing he prayed for, but God perhaps showed a better way. So, did God answer Dave's prayer?

#### LEARNING TO LOOK FOR GOD'S RESPONSE IN UNEXPECTED WAYS

I think much of developing a prayer life and learning to trust in and depend on God is believing that God blesses us richly. What remains is to look for ways that God gives good gifts and perhaps answers our prayer, but maybe not in the way we expected or asked for.

Finally, we all know that sometimes what we pray for results in a heartbreaking ending, like cancer taking a loved one or something like that. Does that mean that was God's response to our prayer? Of course not. Quite clearly there is much that happens in this world that God does not will. But what we are promised in prayer – and promised always - is this: our Father in heaven will be at our side through the gift of the Holy Spirit, holding us up when life has broken us.

#### IN PRAYER, OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN IS *RIGHT NEXT TO YOU* THROUGH THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT!

So heaven has literally come down to you.

So, don't neglect to pray, OK? Amen.