

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Luke 11:1-13

How Then Shall We Pray?

Much like last week I find myself preaching again on a subject that is somewhat difficult for me. I envy people who pray well. Or who have the kind of faith that always believes in prayer. Now that might be shocking for you to hear come out of your ministers mouth but it is one of my deep dark secrets that is now out in the open.

I have tried to become a certain kind of prayer more than once. I have attempted to be holy like Luther and others and get up early in the morning just to pray. But in all honesty I'm not a morning person so unless I don't have to be to work or something else early I really don't want to get busy before I have to - so the prayer times quickly slip into something I'm not sure many would count as holy.

I have attempted to come into my office every morning and begin in silent prayer but quickly I can get interrupted or distracted or realize I forgot to start there (and then I start praying just because I feel guilty and well - then I think that's what it is supposed to be about and...) I have read the books, I have tried the formats. I have heard what proper prayer looks like and how to get results. I have journaled, I have done prayer walks, I have done silent retreats....and the list goes on.

There is a lot of shame in this for me because my mother and my brother are prayers. They both get up every morning and take time in prayer and reading like every good Christian should. In fact my mom used to say every time I had a struggle "Just pray about it" until one day I snapped (Like only a daughter does to her mother). "Mom if it were that easy I wouldn't have called you to talk about it."

And yes this happened after I received the title of Reverend.

Now that I have gotten that off my chest all you 'prayers' out there can say a prayer for me. Because the greatest struggle I find with prayer being an achiever like I am is that if I don't get the result I want I am convinced I have done it all wrong. The struggle with prayer formulas is that if the prayer doesn't work then there appears to be only two options: there is something wrong with me and/or my praying, or there is something wrong with God. If you are someone who has written off faith and religion you most likely have decided there is something wrong with God. If you are a faithful church goer or person of faith then when your prayer doesn't work you are more likely to blame yourself.

I know that people say God gives us three answers to our prayers which are "yes" "no" or "maybe" but even that confuses me because scripture clearly says "Ask, and it will be given you;

search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.” So why is it then when I ask even for good things - healing for a friend, comfort for a person who is depressed, or something for myself - why would God ever say no to those things?

I have come to discover of myself that when I start thinking that way I have forgotten the purpose of prayer. And to be honest I think this struggle I have with prayer just might be God given - because I find myself praying all the more as I seek to understand prayer more and to be connected with God more. I find myself eager to try new spiritual practices all the time. Maybe that is what this parable is about - constant seeking to be in tune with The Holy.

I noticed something in the scripture reading this week that I am not sure I have ever noticed before. Verse 13 says “If you then...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.” Jesus does not say God will give you this and that. Jesus says when you pray you will be blessed with the Holy Spirit.

Now let's be clear because in Matthew's Gospel Jesus teaches that God will give 'good things' to those who ask. But Luke says God will give us the 'holy spirit.' Believe it or not I like Luke's language better. It makes more sense to me. It might sound disappointing at first because obviously we want good things like health, and wealth and safety and if we are honest maybe success and comfort and just a little prestige, we're human after all. But what I have come to discover and this passage confirms it is that being connected with the holy will bring you more contentment no matter what the circumstance. And I can't think of a better thing than to be content with life. Pleased with who God has created us to be.

Perhaps that is why Jesus doesn't give a formula of when and where to pray. He doesn't give us the proper posture or time of day or circumstance. He aligns with Paul when he says “Pray without ceasing.” 1 Thes. 5 says “pray without ceasing...don't quench the spirit” this is one of my favorite passages of scripture because it reminds me that my very life is a prayer. That each breath I take and move I make is in relationship with The Holy. It is when I forget that, that I find myself anxious and wanting.

I fully believe in prayer and it may sound confusing but praying without ceasing has freed me up to know that I actually can pray. It has freed me up to wake up in the mornings as pray in between the snooze alarm, or in the shower, or on my walk, or as I journal - but not just with a certain formula or just for me - for everything and moment I encounter. It means for me that when I feel led to pray when I get into the office in the morning I just do even though I have not done it every day routinely.

I also noticed the other thing that is clear in the prayer of Jesus is that it is a prayer of community. The holy spirit works through individuals in community as we care, provide and love one another. It is the community that in fact first received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost it wasn't an individual trying to make it on their own for themselves. It was a community of disciples that came to be known as Christians through their love.

Kate Huey writes “We are called to be the Body of Christ. We are called to be light, to be salt, to be leaven for the world. We are called to be bread for the world. We are called to live and breathe in radical dependence on, utterly trusting in, the God who made us, and listens to our prayers, and calls us by name, the God who forms us into a community that prays together, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Not just me, but *all of us*. Not for the long-term, but day by day by day. This God gives us the Holy Spirit to depend on and draw strength from. We can *trust* the Holy Spirit.”¹

Jesus prays a very human prayer, a prayer of necessity in human life. He prays God we acknowledge that you are God and because of that we come to you and ask you to give us what we need, forgive us for forgetting you, guide us on our way and keep us safe from the trials of life. Each of these petitions name those things that are essential for life as individuals and community.

Douglas John Hall wrote “The object of prayer Christianly understood, is not so much to lose oneself in the contemplation of the Divine as to find oneself. to become - so far as possible, who one is. *Dependent, guilty, lost and vulnerable... Because the one to whom we pray is not ordinary...but glorious in loving, we are able sometimes through our most honest acts of prayer to find that our very weakness is the occasion for encounter with the Source of new strength.*”

Hall goes on to say “The verses following Jesus’ model prayer serve only to reinforce the point the prayer itself has made: prayer is not a meek contrived, and merely religious act; it is the act of human beings who know how hard it is to be human. Real prayer cannot be faked. Its only prerequisites are sufficient self-knowledge to recognize the depths of our need, and enough humility to ask for help.”²

I actually believe everybody prays whether they think they do or not. Prayer is as Buechner says “the odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad. The ah-h-h! that sometimes floats up out of you as out of a *crowd at a fireworks display* or the stammer of pain at somebody else’s pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else’s joy. Whatever words or sounds you use for sighing with-over your own life. These are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to yourself but to something even more familiar than yourself and even more strange than the world.”³

Prayer it seems to me, is opening ourselves up to the Holy spirit. Intentional prayer acknowledges that opening and the more intentional we are, the more persistent we are the more we will be in tune with the Holy spirit which will make us mindful of good things as individuals and community.

¹ Huey, Kate <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/july-25-2010-seventeenth.html>

² Hall, Douglas John “Feasting on the Word” pg. 290

³ Buechner, Fredrick “Listening to your life” August 13

“Because this prayer (that Jesus taught) is the prayer of our community and not just a private one, it reminds us, challenges us, urges and inspires us as a community not only to form this prayer with our lips but to be formed ourselves by this prayer, formed and shaped into a community of compassion and justice that makes sure that all of God's children have "their daily bread" – and all that that implies today, all that they need from the abundance with which God has blessed us. The prayer calls us to join in the building of God's kingdom not up in heaven, but here, on earth, a reign of justice, healing, mercy, and love.”⁴

So weather you feel like you know how to pray or not. You are invited to pray without ceasing, to pray in community, and as individuals for the Holy spirit presence. Weather you think you pray or not I believe you do - in moments of beauty, awe and despair, in moments of loneliness, and joy acknowledge the spirit with you and you will know that you too are praying.

May we as a community live that kind of kindom come prayer every day of our lives together.

Amen.

⁴ Huey, Kate