

Sermon on Luke 11:1-13
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 25, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

One of the great gifts of the internet is that you can find answers to your questions on your own personal computer, without leaving your chair! (No exhausting research in libraries, just a tap of your fingers on the keyboard!) One particular internet site is called “Ask.com”, where you can ask any kind of question and you will receive an answer instantly. For example, the last time I looked, the site listed questions that people are asking, such as: how do jellyfish breathe? What is a duck boat? (hint: ducks don’t need them to float!) And there’s this particularly relevant question that interested people want to know: “why is Lindsey Lohan in jail?”

If those questions don’t interest you, then you can ask more important questions, such as “how can I be saved?” (You WILL get an answer, though maybe not the one you want, unless you accept Jesus as your personal savior and then are baptized by immersion as a sign of faith. Lutherans, evidently, are not represented on the Ask.com faculty!) Wanting to be faithful to today’s gospel lesson, I asked the website to “teach me to pray”. (If I had power point set up I would show you the website on the wall.) The answer is an internet website called “teachmetoprayer.com”, offering a free school of prayer and a book by Eddie and Alice Smith. Not quite the answer I was looking for. But there are many other related questions and answers about prayer offered as an alternative. Still, I think I prefer to go to the source, which is the gospel of Luke, chapter 11, which we have read today. Why not ask Jesus what He says about prayer?!

The gospel tells about Jesus’ disciples approaching Jesus after he had been praying, and asking him, “Lord, teach US to pray, as John taught his disciples.” For they wanted to learn from him, to imitate him and be able to pray as he did. So Jesus told them to pray in a certain way, which we call today the Lord’s Prayer:

“Abba, (Father, or “Daddy”) 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.”

That’s it. Simple, direct. You and I can go directly to God with our prayers, speaking as one would speak to our earthly mothers or fathers, and expect that God will hear us. There’s nothing mysterious about it, and no holy intermediary or priest is required. You and I can have the conversation ourselves, at church or at

home, out in the woods or in our cars, wherever we are – for God is present there with us! There is no bad time for prayer, and God is never too busy to listen.

Jesus gives us an example of how this might work, by saying “suppose you have a friend, and you go to him (or her) at midnight because you have a guest visiting you, and you have no food to serve your guest. So you go next door to your friend and knock on their door, and ask for a loaf of bread to share with your guest. Now, because it is late, so your friend doesn’t answer right away. But you keep on knocking, because you really need this bread! So your friend comes to the door, and because he knows you, and that you won’t abuse your friendship with a frivolous request, he gives you what you have asked for. Your persistence is key to receiving what you need. The lesson for our prayers to God? Don’t give up, keep on asking even when it seems that your prayers are not being heard. Have faith, and be persistent. Just like Abraham did when he pleaded with God for mercy on the people of Sodom, negotiating with God for 50 righteous persons, then 40, then 30, then 20, and finally, just 10 “righteous persons” to save the city. Abraham was persistent, and God listened to Abraham. So he will listen to us.

So above all, don’t forget to ask God . For Jesus says, “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.”

These words are a great gift to us, a great reminder in an age when most of us try to work things out for ourselves. When we don’t know the answer to a question, most of us try to figure out the answer on our own. Now it’s true, God gave you and me our intellects to work out answers to our questions, and it is good to ask others who are wiser than us, or even consult the internet, but shouldn’t we put God somewhere into the equation? Let’s not wait until we are desperate for an answer, or when all seems lost, then finally go to God in prayer. Rather, we can do what Jesus did: consult God daily, or many times a day in conversation, as you and I would a loving parent or faithful partner or friend who is near to us. He even gives us words to say, such as those of the Lord’s Prayer. We also have the example of the psalms – 150 to be exact, with prayers for almost every kind of human situation.

But I shouldn’t end this sermon without saying a word about that common human feeling that God isn’t listening to our prayers, and isn’t answering our calls to him. Perhaps you are thinking that God doesn’t listen to you, or at least that “heavenly mail box is full”! Perhaps you pray and nothing seems to change, or nothing good seems to happen. Certainly, you and I don’t hear God’s voice audibly to answer our prayers. So is God really listening? Does God answer prayer? Really? Jesus says he does. The scriptures promise it. And many people of faith, our many faith ancestors over the years have said yes, God answers

prayer. So perhaps we aren't being patient in our listening, and instead being *impatient* in our search for an answer to prayer.

But God may not answer us in the time frame or manner in which we are expecting God to answer. We are looking for certain things: an end to an illness, a new job, a different result than what we are presently experiencing. We are often looking for something dramatic, some sign from God that God is listening. But God may answer us in very unexpected ways, such as through the counsel of a human friend or acquaintance, which we may not recognize as God's voice. And it may take months, years, or even a lifetime for you and I to realize the answer that God is giving us. We may not be ready right away to understand God's wisdom or ways. This means that our prayers should also include a request for wisdom and understanding from the Holy Spirit, so that we can learn what God's will is for our lives, and for the good of our neighbors. Because it's not all just about "us".

You know, there is a saying that goes like this: *be careful what you ask for – you just might get it!* Now, that is NOT in the Bible, but it has a point. When you and I ask God to know God's will, and when we ask Jesus how to pray so that we can pray like he does, we may not get the answers we expect! If we are truly disciples seeking to know the truth of God from our Lord Jesus, we are opening ourselves to seek truth that is much greater than what we can understand on our own. We are really asking to know the heart of God, which encompasses a whole universe of truth! We can't just be asking for more success in life, or for some part of our body to stop hurting (though we certainly can ask!). We may ask for more abundance in our lives, and be totally surprised with the kind of abundance God shows us! It may be an abundance of compassion or love for our neighbor, not just an abundance of possessions or food (more about this in next week's sermon!). We may even find that we experience the exact opposite of what we originally asked for, and only much later discover that this truly was best for us!

Perhaps like the disciples, who wanted to learn how to pray like Jesus, maybe so that they could have some of the power Jesus had to do wondrous things. Then, the power Jesus gave them was the power of the Holy Spirit, the gift of faith that leads to wisdom and understanding from God. Maybe that's not exactly what we're praying for when we have our own personal needs and daily experiences of disappointments, joys, fears, and hopes. But this is what God is offering to each of us: an opportunity to grow in faith, hope, and love for God and neighbor, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, which God has given us in baptism. Because of this gift we can pray in confidence and faith, knowing that God is present with us always. And by praying the prayer that Jesus taught, the Lord's Prayer, we can learn to ask for those things that God already has promised to give us: daily bread, forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Thanks be to God for this gift of prayer, and God's promise to listen to us whenever we come to him. In the name of Jesus.