

Sermon on Luke 11:1-13  
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, July 24, 2016  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

*“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”* This is what Jesus’ disciples asked Jesus when they found him praying by himself. They had witnessed his power to heal people’s diseases, cast out demons, feed multitudes of hungry people, forgive sins – a power which he received from God through faith, that he also shared with his disciples. They wanted to know how they could tap into this power, and as they witnessed Jesus praying, they concluded that his power came through prayer – his connection with Almighty God. So they asked him, *“Lord, teach us to pray!”*

So, what is prayer, and how do we use prayer in our lives of faith? Is prayer a wish list of petitions by which we ask God to provide what we aren’t able to provide for ourselves (or others)? Is it a silent, or spoken communication with our Lord in heaven (the immortal, invisible God whom we cannot see, yet believe can help us)? Is it like sending an email message through cyberspace into heaven, where God is at a cosmic keyboard - answering calls in the order in which they are received (if we are patient enough to stay on the line!) or answered simultaneously because, well, God is God! Do we think God answers some prayers and disregards others, depending on the faith by which they are said? Or is something else going on here? What IS prayer, anyway? And how should we do it? I don’t know if I have an answer for this – sorry – but I do have some thoughts on the subject!

Many of us were taught as children, by our parents, to pray before eating, and before bed. We learned that God is a person whom we can talk to, even though we could not see God – like an invisible friend (children are good at making friends, and have good imaginations, so this makes sense). Some of us also learned how to pray in Church as we worship – to confess our sins and pray for forgiveness, to pray for God to teach us through God’s Word in scripture and in preaching, by the power of the Holy Spirit to inspire, teach and guide us. We have learned to compose petitions that we can pray together as a church, the assembled people of God, making intercessions on behalf of those who are suffering, sick, or in mourning – and also to give us compassion to notice them, and the strength to care for others whom we might not otherwise consider. We pray in our Eucharistic prayer for Christ to be present with us at this table, as he has promised, forgive our sins, strengthen us as a community of faith, and send us out into the world. Then we say together this prayer that our Lord taught us in the gospel, to say:

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our*

*sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.*

See, you've learned this part of the lesson well! You do know "how" to pray – as an individual, when you pray to God in silence, and as a community, as you pray out loud with others in worship, for those things that we all care about and need from God. But is that the extent of prayer? This still doesn't answer our questions about whether God really hears us and answers our prayers, when we don't hear any audible voice from God, and may not recognize an answer even when it stares us in the face!

Especially these days, when we are challenged so much as a church and as people living on this planet, and don't know what to do. What do we ask for, and how does God answer, when our congregations are shrinking and the influence of the Church seems to be in decline? What do we do when we are facing direct evidence of the consequences of racism and white privilege in our own communities, when we witness violence from police against citizens AND violence against police, for no rational reason outside of fear. We witness the gun violence on television and in our communities that cause such pain and grief, and we hear vicious political rhetoric by politicians and candidates as well as citizens – that makes us worry about our future together, wondering if we can actually hold it all together, or will we splinter apart and be pitted against each other, as some candidates seem to advocate? It seems that nobody really knows what to do. So is there any left for us to do BUT pray?

The reactions to all of this are as varied as our nation is divided. When tragedies of violence occur, some go directly to social media to vent, some go out to buy a gun in order to "protect themselves", some go to the streets to peacefully protest and shut things down, some go to political rallies or conventions to hear politicians rage about the chaos or propose real solutions. Others invest great time and effort in the political process or in community institutions to try to "do something" about it, some simply "shut themselves down" and stay inside their homes – afraid to come out, and some go to their places of worship to pray and seek guidance. I think I've done them all this year! How about you? We either say we've got to DO something (good or bad), hide in a closet, escape into cyber space, or pray. Is it really such a stark choice? Do something or pray? I wonder.

What if prayer were not simply saying what we wish could happen (that we cannot do ourselves) and leaving the results up to God? (That's how some people characterize prayer!) What if prayer was not only bringing petitions to God, but also voicing for ourselves and as a community together what and who we are most concerned about – and repeating these concerns as prayer enough times that we are encouraged, convinced and strengthened by God to act on our prayers? Shouldn't

our prayers for our loved ones, for our neighbors, and for those who are suffering inspire you and me to *act on their behalf*?

Let me give an example. One of the most common prayers we ever say are for the health of our loved ones who are sick. Do you and I just pray and then just leave it all to God? Hardly. When we pray for the sick in our families, we inform and gather others around us, and then we do some caregiving, take them for medical treatment and do whatever we can to help make things better. At some point we may gather around a hospital bed, when all medical care has been exhausted, and we pray together to leave this person in God's hands and thank God for a lifetime shared. Such prayers give us comfort and hope for the life to come.

So it goes with other prayers we offer. When we pray for justice in our world, or pray for those without homes, and those who are hungry, we seldom just leave it as a prayer – only “words”. As the Church, we are challenged to act on our prayers, to feed the hungry and cloth the naked, by making contributions of food and cash to local food shelves and for programs and ministries that help people work and feed themselves, and organize to work for just economic systems by taking away obstacles which keep people poor. So our prayers for justice and compassion for those suffering should – and often do – move us to action. Prayer is often where it starts, with words directed to God, but continues with our listening for the voice of God and seeing the presence of Christ with our neighbor.

Now, I know that our brother Obang Agwa has been praying for his wife and family in Gambela, Ethiopia, for four long years, after being separated from them since the time they were married. We have also prayed for Obang as a congregation. Were these mere empty words and wishful thinking? No – these were prayers that are being answered as we speak! We prayed, and we worked together to raise money to do the work required for Obang's family to get their clearance for a visa and a passport, medical tests and screening, which took all of these four years to happen. And now we have our answer to prayer: Obang has met his family in Washington D.C. – from their flight from Addis Ababa, and brought them home to St. Paul this past Friday night. God has made this possible – our work together to reunite this family – with faith and prayer, which has inspired us all to do our part. Can you see how prayer has worked for us in this as a community of faith, and for Obang's family? Prayer does work; it empowers us to do great things out of love and compassion for one another, and for our neighbors across the world!

This is a larger, grander view of prayer than we sometimes have – if we only think of prayer as petitions we make to God. Prayer is not like sending an email to God, waiting for a reply! Jesus had a much greater understanding of prayer than this, which he taught his disciples and to us. Prayer is an integral part of a relationship with God that each one of us can have, listening in silence, speaking

our need, and living out a relationship of love with God and neighbor – kind of like breathing, in and out, in and out! Jesus invites you and me to pray with the same confidence that Jesus has, in approaching the God who made us and loves us with the fierce and compassionate love of a mother or father. You and I can pray to this God in confidence as we would to a wise and loving parent, because God responds in love with what is best for us and for the whole world.

So Jesus says, *“Ask, and it will be given to 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.”* It’s not that every single thing we ask for is good for us, every one of our demands will be met, or every wish will be granted. Oh, no! God is not Santa Claus! But what we say is heard, and Jesus himself is at the door when we knock, seeking the truth, ready to open the door to the heart and the wisdom of God.

There is much more to be said, of course, about prayer, but think today about the power of prayer, and what it can lead us to through faith, when we use this great gift. So pray with me, please, in closing:

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray as you prayed to God, as an example of faith to your followers. Help us to follow your example, teach us to ask, to seek, and to knock at your door every day, seeking your truth, your compassion, and your love. Encourage us as we pray, to listen for your words of love, to imitate your compassion, and empower us to act with faith towards you and love for one another, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gracious God, be with those who mourn the loss of loved ones killed by a teenage shooter in Munich, Germany, by the terrorist bombing in Kabul, Afghanistan and the civilians killed by U.S. bombing in Syria this past week. Bring healing to our broken world. Hear us, O God.

God of all immigrants, refugees and sojourners: we thank you for reuniting Obang Agwa with his family after four long years. Bless Ariet, Odom and \_\_\_\_\_ as they begin their new life in St. Paul. Protect all immigrants and refugees throughout the world, especially those who live in refugee camps with little hope of finding a place of safety for their children. Hear us, O God.