

July 28, 2019

Luke 11: 1-13

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“The Pathway of Prayer”

It's been awhile since I shared a grandpa story and I want you to know it hasn't been easy. This morning I invite your indulgence, as I give in to what is a constant temptation for me. Our granddaughter, Nora, is going on two-and-a-half. The other evening she and her parents were over for a light supper. As we sat down to eat with Nora strapped into her booster seat next to me, we shared a prayer. We held hands around the table, and I spoke words thanking God for the food and the family. We ended the prayer as we always do, by saying “Amen.” Except this time, we made a big deal of it. When you are two-and-a-half and learning new words and new things about life what is routine for adults is exciting to you. When we spoke the word “Amen,” we did it with great drama and Nora was all smiles. This is fun. So we kept holding hands while turning to Nora, “What do we say?” we cued her. We say “Amen.” So we all said it again and Nora chimed right in, “Amen.” We were just a minute or two into the grilled chicken when Nora held up her hands and said, “Again.” She wanted to pray. Now we were all smiling. So, we laid our forks down, held hands, and after a quick prayer, we said it again, “Amen.” That's the part Nora was waiting for. We got back to the eating, accompanied by the usual family table talk and when there was a brief lull in the conversation I turned to Nora and asked, “What would you like to talk about?” She said, “Again,” with her hands outstretched for another prayer session. “Amen,” we said. And she said, “Again.” “Amen.” “Again,” the litany continued. Then I finally said, “Now, that's enough praying for one meal.” I mean, we had food to eat and we needed to get on with it. “Here,” I said to Nora, hoping to distract her, “try some chicken. It's good.” This, of course, is ultimately what we were teaching my granddaughter. Prayer is important but we can't pray all the time. We've got food to eat and jobs to do and lives to live. The Apostle Paul said we are to pray without ceasing but I'm not sure he was being realistic. Prayer is important but we've still got to attend to the matters at hand. Everybody knows that.

When we come to the middle of Luke's Gospel the section could be labeled, “How to be a Disciple.” The twelve are with him and also many others whom Jesus has called to share in his mission. He's teaching the whole crowd how to live a life that is centered in the reality of God. Now, his followers not only listened to what Jesus said, they watched what he did. And so it was one day, they watched Jesus return from a time of prayer and they said to him, “Teach us how to do that. Teach us how to pray.” What follows are the words of the prayer we all know, a prayer we are taught when we are young in the faith. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...” The Lord's Prayer is a beautiful component of our Christian tradition. It is a familiar part of our worship. In fact, it may be one of the only sections of scripture we have memorized word for word. I'll never forget the experience I had early in my ministry when I visited a woman who was suffering from dementia. It was impossible to have a conversation with her and she rarely knew her family, let alone who I was or why I was there. I'll never forget the visit, though, because of what happened when I prayed with her. I held her hand and said the words of The Lord's Prayer. As I spoke, she started to say the words with me and she did so without a miss. We know the words by heart, which allows us to call them to mind without any effort. There is blessing in this, that the words are woven into the fabric of our being but there's a flip side, too. Because the words are so familiar we can miss the truth of what Jesus has taught us. We know the words but do we know why Jesus gives us the words to pray?

As may be true for some of you, I grew up in a family that nearly always said a prayer before meals. This is why we pass the tradition on to our kids and our grandkids. When I was growing up the words we almost always repeated are words you probably learned, too. “God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. By his hands we shall be fed. Give us, Lord, our daily bread.” And the best part, of course, “Amen.” Even now, I can say the words without thinking and this is, of course, the point. We really should think about it. I was reading an article about this simple children's table grace and the author said it's not as simple as we may assume. It's deeply theological. When we say “God is great,” it's not like Tony the Tiger does when he talks about cornflakes. To acknowledge God's greatness is to be reminded of God's authority and power in our lives. God is good, and we say that not just to give an easy phrase to memorize and rhythm. God's goodness points us to the love of God that can never be taken from us. The prayer is simple but the truth it points us toward is deep and life-giving. The same is true with The Lord's Prayer. “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth...” Jesus gives us more than just the words to say, he points us toward the truth. Jesus gives us the words of the prayer but what he's really giving us is the pathway to live the prayer. I want to push the “pause” button right here. The prayer is about our lives and the gospel wants us to take this to heart this morning. Our life with Jesus is never about words. Our life with Jesus is about just that, our life. Let's think about it. The very title we give to the words Jesus teaches misses the mark. We call it, The Lord's Prayer. No. This isn't The Lord's Prayer. Jesus teaches us the words so that it becomes, Our

Prayer. We're praying about how we want to live our lives and this is so much deeper than just reciting something from memory on Sunday morning. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done..." The coming of God's kingdom connects to everything. Whether we're sitting in worship or sitting at the kitchen table or standing beside a hospital bed of a loved one or laying our heads on our pillows before we go to sleep, the words of the prayer connect our lives with the reality of God so that what we most want is perfectly aligned with what God wants. "Teach us to pray," the disciples asked Jesus. What he showed them and what he shows us is how to live the prayer. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth.

You've probably heard it said that authentic prayer is less about our talking and more about our listening. I like that. When we pray we listen to hear what God is saying. It follows then that our prayers are most faithful when we feel our hearts connect with God's heart so that God's desire for our lives becomes our own. I mentioned earlier how impossible it is to pray without ceasing. Yes, this would be true if praying was just about our words. Prayer is living a life where God's will is our constant path and Jesus wants that for us every minute of every day.

I'd like to end the preaching time with our praying the prayer Jesus taught us but we'll do it differently than we usually do. Let's take a step together in making The Lord's Prayer (Our Prayer) a way of life. To do this we'll slow it down and take it in smaller pieces. I'll speak a phrase of the prayer and then invite you to repeat that phrase with me. After we've spoken the phrase together we'll pause, reflect and then I'll speak other words to help us discern God's will. Then, we'll move on to the next phrase following this pattern. We're going to have to think to make this work and that's OK. We know it by heart and this morning we are thinking about it so that it can move down into our hearts in an even deeper way. Let's pray the prayer Jesus taught us.

"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven..." [O God, you are our creator and your goodness is infused in every aspect of our being. Help our hearts be open to your heart. Align our will with yours. May your plan for us and your world be known and enable us to live in solidarity with your purposes. This we pray...]

"Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us..." [O God, your grace is everlasting. You provide for us daily and you give us such a portion of grace that there is more than enough to share. We need our food, and we are thankful, but even more we need healing and forgiveness in our lives. Help us not only to receive your grace but to offer it, freely and without price.]

"And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil..." [O God, life is not easy. We are pulled to turn from you and we are challenged to stay on the path you would have us walk. We seek your leading. We need your guiding hand to show us the way. You have promised to always be with us, so give us the strength to always be with you.]

"For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever..." [O God, we end our prayer the way we begin, by opening our hearts to the reality of your kingdom. Your influence never fails. Your influence is constant. Your wonder and your awesome glory is infused within every aspect of our world and live. Help us to never take the wonder of our relationship with you for granted.]

And to all of this we say, **"Amen."**

The word "Amen" is the actual ancient Hebrew word that still survives in our language. The meaning we ascribe to "Amen" is "so be it." The end of the prayer is really where it all begins for us. The true prayer of our Lord is that what we pray will become evident in the way we live. So be it, this day, every day, now and always. **Amen.**