

July 29, 2018

Luke 11: 1-13

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Persistence in Prayer”

Prayer is not about words. Some have wondered, “If there is intelligent life somewhere in the universe and space travelers came to our planet and visited churches on Sunday morning they might assume the focus of worship is words, and lots of them. We depend on our words and preachers are at the top of the list. In fact, we all rely on words. We print them, sing them, display them, read and hear them. We have bulletins full of words and we use a screen and hymnals. It is hard to imagine Sunday morning without all the words. Given that, it’s good to be reminded that our worship, and our faith for that matter, is about much more than words. When we think about the power of prayer this is the place to start. Prayer is fundamentally more than our words.

The gospel stories give witness to what Jesus did as he carried the reality of God into the world. He taught, he healed, he performed miracles and he took on the established religious and political authorities of his day. He moved from village to town, walked the land and traveled the sea by boat. His was constantly on the move in his mission to connect as many people as possible to the way God was ruling in their lives and Jesus used words to communicate that truth. We even say, “Jesus is THE Word that becomes flesh and dwells among us.” Clearly, words have their place in our faith but like with Jesus the words we write, speak and read point to what is deeper. When we follow the path of Jesus in the gospels we discover he regularly pulled away to pray. His prayer wasn’t about spoken or written words. For Jesus, prayer was deepened his relationship with God. This is its true power. Prayer connects us to God. Prayer shapes our relationship with God. The words we speak and write are important. They can be filled with our passion and our intentionality. But, if our words do not connect us to God they are not prayer. The purpose of prayer is to link us to the purpose of God. This is its power.

The gospel place we’ve read from today finds Jesus teaching the disciples to pray. We know every time Jesus gives a lesson on discipleship it’s a lesson for us, too. These are the places in the bible where it is important to give our attention. We can imagine the disciples paid attention to how often Jesus spent time in prayer. They experienced what his prayer time did for him, how Jesus came back energized and focused to do his work. The disciples wanted what Jesus had. They wanted to be renewed in the mission like he was. “Lord,” they said, “teach us to pray.”

As a first-time grandfather of a 15 month-old, I’ve disciplined myself not to share too many granddaughter stories, but this morning I can’t help myself. The early years of a child’s development are full of important firsts. For a time, the family was completely focused on Nora taking her first steps. There was a lot of encouraging and coaxing from us for her to let go and walk. The video went viral among the extended family the day she decided to take off and waddle across the room. Now that she’s got the walking underway our focus is on her words. Like all little ones, she makes sounds and gestures to communicate but her actual vocabulary is quite limited. She’s had the word “dada” for awhile and everyone is coaching her on “mama” but it’s not quite there. This past week I spent some alone time with Nora and I coached her on the word I’m waiting to hear, “papa.” Many have asked, “What’s Nora going to call you?” That will be her decision some day but I’m coaching her with my choice, “papa.” So, I coached her up this past week. I told her parents I thought she said it but it was probably just my wishful thinking. All we can do is to keep coaching her to mimic what we say. It’s an ongoing process, teaching another the words to say, but we know the time will come when she will find her own voice.

As the disciples follow Jesus they are, in many ways, like babes in the faith. They learn what it means to be his disciples by mimicking what Jesus says and does. “Teach us to pray, Lord.” Jesus begins the lesson, “Pray like this, ‘Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.’” (Luke 11:2-3) The simplicity of what Jesus teaches is a gift. The problem is we’ve focused too much on the words themselves and not enough on the deeper truth behind them. Early in the history of the church what Jesus teaches was labeled *The Lord’s Prayer*. The church wrapped a catechism around it. In other words, the church instructed that we memorize the words so we can easily repeat them. The assumption is that praying like Jesus means repeating the words. Let me be quick to say that memorizing the words of the prayer is not wrong. As others have observed, *The Lord’s Prayer* unites us. When Christians speak the prayer together it unifies our speech and gives us a shared experience. But, this brings us back to the issue for today. Prayer is more than words. We would never imagine the goal Jesus had was to give us phrases to memorize and that be the end of it. Jesus teaches us how to pray not just what to say. The words are intended to connect us to God. To be clear, if we speak the words of The Lord’s Prayer and don’t experience the deeper truth to which they point we have not fully learned the lesson Jesus gives us. “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come...” It’s the truth not the words that hold the power.

“Father, hallowed be your name...” Every prayer first acknowledges that God is holy. What does that mean to you? When we experience the holy we experience something that carries us beyond ourselves. Holiness goes beyond our time and place. Some of us have had the experience of traveling to Israel and touring the part of the world we call The Holy Land. Is there something inherently different about the ground? Are the rocks in The Middle East different from the rocks we have here? Is there something magical there that makes the place holy and other places not? Obviously, the geography isn’t the key. I remember the feeling I had the first time I looked out on the Sea of Galilee. It was just water surrounded by hills. It was the same sun shining that day as is shining today. The holiness I felt wasn’t the place but how being in that place connected me to a reality greater than that mere moment in time. Prayer begins by acknowledging God is holy, greater than any one moment, more lasting than one person’s thought, and more significant than a particular place. God is holy because of grace and love and peace and healing that transcends every boundary in our world. God is holy, we pray and then, Jesus teaches, we pray God’s kingdom come. Different from the way we experience holiness in special places, the kingdom isn’t about a location. God’s kingdom is God ruling in our lives. When Matthew’s gospel gives us *The Lord’s Prayer* he connects it to the will of God. “Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth...” Prayer isn’t about us ruling the world. Prayer isn’t making happen what we want. Prayer is God’s way and God’s rule as the priority of our lives. This is a challenge for me and maybe for you, too. Often we pray to God as a way of getting God on board with what we want. We use the words of our prayers like a tool of persuasion. We pray hard and often, not so much to seek God’s way but with the hope God will come around to our way. It’s a vital lesson Jesus teaches us. Pray as I do, he says, not just in words but to connect your purpose with God’s purpose in the world.

I’ve thought often about what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, “Pray without ceasing.” (Thess. 5:17) One preacher tells the story that when he was young his mom would give him 5 cents for every bible verse he memorized. He loved the short ones like, “Pray without ceasing.” That was easy until he realized later in life what is behind the words. We don’t pray without ceasing in the sense that we constantly talk to God. To pray without ceasing is to always know who we are in relationship with God, the holy one. Prayer is knowing that now, tomorrow and forever God is in control. This is what Jesus taught and his goal is we would never cease to know this truth.

In our worship we often say the words Jesus taught us. Here’s our assignment for this week. Pray the words Jesus taught us to pray as often as you can. Repeat the words, and not just to feel confident to know the words by heart. Pray the words so that our lives will reflect the lesson Jesus has given. God is holy in grace and love and peace, and God is ruling in our lives, now and forever. If our words and our world reflect this truth we are most certainly the faithful followers of Christ.