

ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME  
SUNDAY, JULY 28, 2013  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
MARIANNA, FLORIDA  
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LUKE 11:1-13

Our lesson today is about prayer. It begins with Jesus in prayer. Have you ever noticed how many times the New Testament refers to Jesus praying? One might ask the question, "Why would the Son of God, God in human flesh, pray at all? Didn't Jesus know the mind of God?"

Tough question, but fair. Don't we ever debate with our selves, weigh both sides of an argument, wrestle with a decision? Wasn't Jesus also fully human? And didn't He do all of these things, and didn't He wrestle every day with what it was like to live as the Son of God and the Son of Man at the same time in the same body? But in this strange dual nature that was Jesus, He was God, but He was also the Son of God, and from time to time, consulted with His Father.

Next, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. I've often pondered that. Can prayer be taught? Oh, we can teach the words of a prayer, and we have learned the words to the Lord's Prayer, and to other prayers, but is knowing the words to a prayer the same as praying? Does prayer require words? Does prayer even require thought?

We pray silently twice during our worship service each Sunday. What do you do during that time? Do you at the prayer of confession think about your sins of the past week? Of this morning? And at the time of prayer of intercession and supplication do you mentally review the names on your personal prayer list, do you lift up to God your own personal needs?

Or do you sit there in the pew with your eyes closed, waiting for the Amen?

Thirty years or so ago, when I took my chaplaincy training at a Roman Catholic hospital, St. Francis, in Charleston, West Virginia, I learned a lot about prayer that I didn't know. I'd never "prayed a psalm." Oh, I'd read psalms, and sang psalms, and recited psalms, but I learned to pray a psalm from the good sisters at Saint Francis.

I also learned that prayer is a two-way street. We must listen for God's answers to our prayers, and silent prayer is often a time of actively listening, of listening with the heart and mind and soul rather than the ears.

At its simplest, prayer is talking to God, talking to our heavenly Father, talking to our best friend, Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Prayer is the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples when they asked Him to teach them to pray. The form here in Luke is shorter than the one in Matthew, and some Sunday I'll preach a sermon on the Lord's Prayer, or maybe a series of them, but that isn't this Sunday's sermon.

This Sunday's sermon is about the string of parables and the teaching in the middle, that Jesus threw at the disciples as He was teaching them to pray.

The first little parable is about a man who is sleeping, and his neighbor comes and knocks on the door wanting to borrow three loaves of bread, because an unexpected guest has arrived at his house, and he has nothing to feed him. That uninvited guest must have been traveling with an entourage if it was going to take three loaves of bread to feed him!

In the Middle East, as in the old South, hospitality is a sacred duty, and if someone arrives at your house, you are supposed to feed them. And if a neighbor asks anything of you, well, the neighborly thing to do is to give them that for which he asks.

Jesus implies that story can teach us about prayer.

Old Willie Barclay wrote that: "The lesson of this parable is not that we must persist in prayer; it is not that we must batter at God's door until we finally compel God for very weariness to give us what we want; until we coerce an unwilling God to answer. A parable literally means something laid alongside. If we lay something beside another thing to teach a lesson, that lesson may be drawn from the fact that the things are like each other or from the fact that the things are in contrast to each other. The point here is based, not on likeness but on contrast. What Jesus said is 'If a churlish and unwilling householder can in the end be coerced by a friend's shameless persistence into giving him what he needs, how much more will God, who is a loving father, supply all His children's needs?' 'If you,' said Jesus, 'who are evil, know that you are bound to supply your children's needs, how much more will God (give you)?'"

*The Gospel of Luke, pp. 148-9*

And then Jesus tells them to ask, seek, and knock.

Asking is the easy part. There is an assumption that God will give us anything we ask for. That is a false assumption. God will give us anything that we ask for that is according to God's will, that is according to God's purpose for our lives. For the child dwelling in house on a small lot in a crowded city neighborhood to pray for a pony every night is probably a vain prayer. What would he do with a pony, where would he keep it, what would it eat, where would he dispose of the droppings?

But if later on in life, that little boy now a grown man seeks to own a horse, and pay to board it at a stable, or buys land to keep his horses on, he is seeking to make God's will, God's plan, God's purpose, a reality. And so those horses get used to start horse programs at two church camps in two states, and they are used in ministry at a girl's juvenile justice facility, and they are used in "equestrian therapy, and that is finding God's will.

But seeking is hard sometimes, seeking God's will, seeking God's time.

And knocking is hard. We'd rather stand outside the door and wait for someone to open it.

Folks, I've knocked on a lot of doors in my life. Had a few slammed in my face. Had a few folks holler from inside the closed door, "Go away, don't bother me."

My friend from seminary days Richard Hills started a new church over in the Deltona area. They built 1800 homes in the community where his church is located. He knocked on every door, inviting the people who moved in to the church he served. I asked him how many members the church gained from his effort. He said, "Three, but they were really good members!"

I'm still knocking on doors. I knocked on a door by sending a form to an interim pastor search committee a little less than a year ago, and the door was opened for me to come and be your interim pastor.

I prayed about it, I sought God's will, and I knocked on the door, and God opened the door and you made me welcome.

Another quote from William Barclay: "There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. The answer give may not be the answer we desired or expected. Even when it is a refusal of our wishes it is the answer of the love and wisdom of God."

Sometimes, God answers, "NO." Other times, God answers, "Wait." With some of my prayers, I'm convinced God laughs. At others, God says, "You've got to be kidding me!"

But I've seen God's answers to prayer in the lives of the people for which I've prayed, and in my own life. I've seen God's answers in the lives of the churches I've served.

The church I retired from a year and a half ago is in the process of electing a Pulpit Nominating Committee. You see, we're a whole lot ahead of them! But then you've had a better interim pastor!

But they are doing something very special. They are entering a season of prayer for the church. They are asking each member of the church to pray for the church every morning at 8 o'clock. And if that isn't convenient, to pick another time, noon, four, six, when ever, but to pray for the church at that time every day.

Will it make a difference? What will happen? Let's wait and see!

In the meantime, I'm going to ask you to pray for this church. Pray for your elders. Pray for your committees, especially the Pulpit Nominating Committee. Pray for Stanley, and Larry, and Valerie, and Melissa, Mary and Trey in the nursery. And, if you've got a prayer or two left over, you can even pray for your Interim Pastor.

Ask God to bless this church, and the folks who worship and serve in it. Seek God's will for this church and for your life. And knock on every door that you come to, to see what God has waiting on the other side.

Let us pray.

Lord, help us to ask, and accept your answers, to seek, and recognize what we find, and to knock, so that doors may be opened to us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.