

Proper 12 C Sermon
Luke 11:1-13
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Teach Us To Pray
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[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” ²*He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.* ³*Give us each day our daily bread.* ⁴*And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”* ⁵*And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;’* ⁶*for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’* ⁷*And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’* ⁸*I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.* ⁹*“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.* ¹⁰*For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*

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Two men were walking through a field one day when they spotted an enraged bull. Instantly they darted toward the nearest fence. The storming bull followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent they wouldn't make it. Terrified, the one shouted to the other, “Put up a prayer, John. We're in for it!” John answered, “I can't. I've never made a public prayer in my life.” “But you must!” implored

his companion. “The bull is catching up to us.” “All right,” panted John, “I’ll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to repeat at the table: ‘O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.’”¹

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It’s good to pray, but sometimes we just don’t know what to say! And sometimes we know what to say, but we’re not sure if it’s good to pray. And sometimes we are simply at a loss when it comes to prayer. I mean, are we supposed to treat prayer like it’s our own private 911 line to God? Are we supposed to treat God like some cosmic Santa Claus and, like Jesus says, simply “Ask” and expect to “receive?” Are we supposed to pray prescribed “holy” words or is it ok just to say what’s on our hearts? How do we measure the efficacy of prayer – how do we chart the outcomes? What are we supposed to think when we don’t get the answer we were praying for or when we feel we don’t get an answer at all?

Surely these questions, at least some of them, were on the disciples’ minds when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray and my guess is, if we’re honest, these may be our questions too.

In this sermon I’d like to present three truths about prayer, but I need to tell you at the outset, these “truths” come from the Gospel According to Brandon. These observations are informed by scripture, by readings from a variety of other sources, and by personal experience, but at the end of the day, these are my opinions and the beautiful thing about our kind of church is that you don’t have to agree. A topic as deeply rooted and as deeply personal as prayer should be deeply considered by each and every one of us. I don’t get to have the last word about how you should think of prayer—you do. That said, here are three truths about prayer.

¹ “The Appropriate Prayer,” Saltforsermons.org, April 29, 2015, <http://saltforsermons.org.uk/the-appropriate-prayer/>.

Firstly, God isn't Father Christmas and a practice of prayer that comes across "as adult letters to Santa Claus" (John Shelby Spong) may lack the kind of depth and integrity that many of us are seeking from a robust life of faith. The truth is, if we want something, if we pray for something, then we also need to expect the fact that we may have to work for it – that we may have to be part of the answer to our own prayer. If we pray for world peace, we should be working for world peace. If we pray for the hungry, we should be feeding the hungry. If we pray for the sick, we should be comforting the sick. Prayer is not a substitute for action. It is a call to action.

The second truth I'd like to share about prayer is related to the first: the greatest power of prayer rests in its ability to change not God, but us. Mother Teresa once said: "I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that [God] will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things." Prayer changes us, not God, and God uses us to change the world.

The third and perhaps most difficult truth to accept is that even if we pray for something and work hard to make it a reality, it still may not come to be. Sometimes difficulty, struggle, and heartache can't be prayed away – just experienced. Take, for example, this story about a man and a butterfly:

"A man sat and watched the small opening in a cocoon for several hours as a butterfly struggled to force its body through the little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and it could go no further. So the man decided to help the butterfly. He took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily, but it had a swollen body and small shriveled wings. The man continued to watch the butterfly. He expected that, at any moment, the butterfly would take off in freedom.

“It didn’t happen! In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It was never able to fly.

“What the man did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening was [nature]’s way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon.”²

Sometimes difficulty, struggle, and heartache can’t be prayed away – just experienced, because it’s just part of life, it’s just part of being human and, like the butterfly, we may never fly as human beings if we aren’t given the space to evolve through difficulty.

As the 20th century sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan once said:

[We ask] for strength, and [instead we receive] difficulties to make [us] strong. [We ask] for wisdom, and [instead we receive] problems to learn to solve. [We ask] for prosperity, and [instead we receive] a brain and brawn to work. [We ask] for courage, and [instead we receive] dangers to overcome. [We ask] for love, and [instead we encounter] people to help. [We ask] for favors, and [instead we receive] opportunities.³

So there you have it, three truths about prayer. Prayer is a call to action. Prayer changes us, not God. And sometimes our struggles can’t be prayed away, just experienced, because that’s how we grow. As you pray, may you be inspired to act, equipped as change-agents in the world, and strengthened for the challenges that lay ahead. With the disciples may we all say, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Amen.

² “The Butterfly,” Habitsforwellbeing.com, <https://www.habitsforwellbeing.com/poem-the-butterfly/>.

³ Hazarat Inayat Khan. Loveexpands.com, <https://loveexpands.com/author/hazrat-inayat-khan/>.