

# “Bending our Lives Toward God”

Psalm 138  
Luke 11:1-13

June 20, 2010

*For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*

Luke 11:10

The Lord’s Prayer is a life long act of bending our lives toward God.

In a particular scene from *Shadowlands*, the film based on the life of **C.S. Lewis**, Lewis has returned to Oxford from London, where he has just been married to Joy Gresham.

The ceremony took place at her hospital bedside. She is dying of cancer. In the midst of their courtship, as she struggled with her illness she and Lewis have been discovering their deep love for each other. As Lewis arrives at Magdalen College where he teaches, he is met by Harry Harrington, an Episcopal priest, who asks what news there is. Lewis hesitates; then, deciding to speak of the marriage and not the cancer, says, “*Ah, good news, I think, Harry. Yes, good news.*”

Harrington, not aware that a marriage date had been set and thinking that Lewis is referring to Joy’s medical situation, replies, “*I know how hard you’ve been praying ... Now, God is answering your prayer.*”

“*That’s not why I pray, Harry,*” Lewis responds. “*I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. [And Harry,] prayer doesn’t change God; it changes me.*”

In our continuing sermon and adult education *Summer with Parables*, we have come to that parable of Jesus that Luke uses to teach his community about the purpose and content of prayer – and in no small measure about the nature of the God to whom we pray.

This parable has, over the centuries been variously titled, The Friend at Midnight, the Importunate Friend, and the Shameless Neighbor – all

titles focusing on the petitioner. Yet from the perspective of the lesson itself the eyes of faith are drawn not to the persistent neighbor trying to roust a friend from his bed at midnight, but to the householder ... the parent ... (and on this Father's Day) the father.

In the span of 13 verses Holy Scripture sandwiches the parable proper (the Shameless Neighbor), between two slices of bread the first of which offers a model for prayer (the Lord's Prayer) and the second an assurance that God indeed hears our prayers (ask, seek, and knock).

In pulling together three teachings of Jesus, circulating in the oral tradition in those early years into a lesson on prayer, Luke creates one of the most memorable and remembered set of verses in his Gospel. In answer to the petition, "Lord teach us to pray," the faithful are given an example, a story about the nature of the One to whom we pray, and an assurance that our Divine Parent hears our prayers.

**Alan Culpepper**, Dean of the School of Theology of Mercer University, in commenting on this text (NIB, 238) says, that only those who know their own need and the love of God as like that of a Heavenly Father will be able to pray truly. While explicitly speaking of the loving Fatherhood of God this set of passages in Luke implicitly cast the one who prays in the position of a shameless neighbor waking a friend at midnight or as a child in need asking food from a parent.

The assurance offered in these verses, that ours is a God who opens, gives and allows, carries with it the danger that we can come to see prayer as a blank check on which we can write anything our heart desires – from the frivolous to the deadly serious. The error of our ways has to do with what we understand prayer to be.

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In reflecting Jesus' admonition in this regard, **Tom Long**, of Candler School of Theology writes, "Prayer is not a message scribbled on a note, jammed into a bottle and tossed into the sea in hopes that it will wash up someday on God's shoreline. Prayer is communion with God. We speak to God, but God touches us, embraces us, and changes us. Whether we pray for rain or for sunshine our prayer is answered, because in the act of praying we receive the gift we really seek – intimacy with God!" (Long).

In her spiritual memoir The Cloister Walk, **Kathleen Norris** says that,

*“While prayer may originate in our own desires, it quickly moves beyond them into our lives with others, and toward the greater society. This inward/outward dynamic of prayer was described perfectly in the sixth-century by a monk named Dorotheus of Gaza: the world is a circle, with God at the center and our lives drawn from the circumference toward the center. The closer the lines crowd toward God, the closer they are to one another; and the closer they are to one another the closer they become to God”* (Norris).

Like the spokes of a bicycle wheel, our prayers, directed toward God the Center, move us in a closer and closer proximity one to another. As we seek God we are drawn together in closer and closer communion to each other. The truth of it is overwhelming. It’s an image that applies to all who seek the sacred and the holy, regardless of our name.

Norris relates the words of a Benedictine friend, a gentle, thoughtful man who had been in constant pain for years and confined to a wheelchair. He says of prayer, *“Often, all I can do is ask God, ‘Lord what is it you want of me?’”*

From him Kathleen Norris has learned that prayer is not asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you can’t imagine. To be made more grateful, more able to see the good in what you have been given instead of grieving for what might have been. (Norris)

**Prayer is the lifelong act of bending our lives toward God in the way God has offered.**

Jesus prayer says *“**Thy** will be done, **Thy** kingdom come.”* We have quite enough teaching in the various modes of getting what we want in this world, writes Will Willimon. “We build our little kingdoms all over this world and the wreckage is all around us.” (Willimon).

When the disciples asked Jesus about prayer, he did not tell them to go off and sit quietly until something spiritual came to their minds. He did not ask them, “Well, how do you feel about God? He said “Pray like this, ‘Our Father ...’” This prayer, our Lord’s Prayer, is above all a gift.

And the early church took Jesus' teaching on prayer and placed a parable about shameless persistence right before it. *"I tell you even if the householder will not get out bed because it is his friend knocking on the door at midnight, he will get up in order to end the aggravation!"*

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For most of us one of the most difficult aspects of meeting new people is not knowing what to say at first. How should we address them? What subject should we bring up first? *"New in town?" "Wasn't that a terrible storm last night?"* In giving us this prayer, Jesus has not left us to our own devices in our relationship with God. We don't have to flail around, trying to think up something to say to God. All we have to do is to say these words out of habit, by heart.

It is the Lord's prayer. We who are accustomed to thinking of prayer as a good strategy for getting what we want ... (e.g., "The family that prays together stays together"), or an appropriate opening for a football game ("Lord, keep us safe and free from injury"), or important civic meetings, ("May our community be blessed by what we do here this day") ... for those us who see prayer solely as petition may be surprised that we must be taught to pray.

**The Lord's Prayer, and all prayer, is not a pious act for getting what we want but rather an act of devotion – of bending our wants toward which God wants.**

In praying this prayer together, we testify to God, and anyone who is listening, how God has dealt with us. Being "saved" is not some individual achievement, not the result of some flash of personal insight, not the securing of life's sense of meaning, although all of that might happen in the process of praying this prayer. **Salvation is the delightful surprise of having your life bent toward God when all you were doing was memorizing a little prayer.**

Homebound communion is a significant ministry of this congregation. On the first Sunday of each month, pastors, deacons & elders share the Lord's Supper with our nursing home and home bound members. In every case we end our time together with the Lord's Prayer.

There was a time when I thought it was too repetitious and so I would allow the Spirit to guide an extemporaneous prayer. After all I am the trained religious professional in that living room or at that bedside. It's part of my stock in trade to pray in the Spirit. But I have learned better. I have come to realize that regardless of

the state health or state of mind of the person I am visiting, every one of them can pray the Lord's Prayer, or at least phrases of it. And if they cannot say it, they very much want to say it. It is so deeply imbedded in the heart of faith.

And that is why every worship service in this church always includes the saying of our Lord's Prayer, somewhere in the service. When is missing in a worship service, something vitally important is missing – even when omitted for an important reason.

Over the years I have heard, let us say “constructive comments” from worshippers concerning every aspect of a worship service – the hymns, the organ, the anthem, the sermon, the flowers, the P A system, the temperature. But I have never heard, *“Oh, no. Not the Lord's Prayer again!”*

We know it by heart. We can only know it by heart. For those nurtured in the church is second nature to us. It is the model from which all prayer is based. **In praying this prayer we are bending our lives toward the God who has reached out to us. We are having our lives caught up in the larger purposes of God.**

So let us pray the prayer our Lord taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
 hallowed be thy name,  
 thy kingdom come,  
 thy will be done,  
 on earth as it is in heaven.  
 Give us this day our daily bread;  
 and forgive us our debts,  
 as we forgive our debtors;  
 and lead us not into temptation,  
 but deliver us from evil.  
 For thine is the kingdom,  
 and the power, and the glory  
 forever.  
 Amen

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