

“Ask, Search, Knock”
Luke 11:1-13
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17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray and Jesus answers them with this prayer – you will recognize it as a sparse version of what we know as the Lord’s prayer. The prayer that we say every week in worship is closer to the one we find in Matthew’s gospel, though the final part of the prayer we say together – “for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever” is not original to either gospel. Tradition has dressed up the prayer. But of all the versions that we know, Luke’s version is the most brief.

“Father, hallowed be your name. Your dominion come. Give us, forgive us for we also forgive, deliver us. That’s it. That’s the prayer. There’s not even an “Amen.” It’s only *thirty-five words* in the Greek.

I have to say it’s kind of embarrassing as one of the people charged with keeping the service to a manageable length every week. I don’t have a stellar record in that department and most of the time I have a pretty good theological defense for it: God deserves our time more than anything else that competes for it – more than concerts, sporting events, or brunch at noon. But one hour worshipers, today it’s your turn – it only takes Jesus 35 words to pray, how come it takes our pastor so many more? Father, or Mother, or Parent hallowed be your name. Your dominion come. Give us, forgive us, deliver us.¹ We’re done, let’s go home.

The simplicity of the prayer is almost shocking: give us, forgive us, deliver us. It’s shocking because it doesn’t sound very sophisticated. It doesn’t sound flowery. It doesn’t sound polished. There are no “pleases” to soften its pushiness. There are no “blessed” thises or thats. It’s shocking because it’s direct, straightforward, brazen.

And maybe that’s the real issue that Jesus is trying to address – disciples who haven’t learned how to pray because they’re afraid their own prayers aren’t sophisticated enough, aren’t honorable enough, aren’t poetic enough. Disciples who have been trained to believe that in order for God to hear them, their prayers have to be dressed up in polished language, sophisticated syntax that softens real needs, real hopes and desires.

Jesus doesn’t dress up his prayers – he’s not interested in well-scripted prayers that play well in the public spaces. He’s not interested in religious-speak that doesn’t address the world as we find it. He’s not interested in piety that is separate from the concerns of living, breathing human beings. He offers a prayer that makes demands of God and God’s people. He doesn’t

¹ Thanks to Douglas John Hall for this nice paraphrase in his reflection in *Feasting on the Word*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2010, p. 290.

soften brazen demands with padded language. He goes straight to the point – bring your kingdom. Give us. Forgive us, Deliver us.

That is what you do when you pray this short, clumsy prayer. *You make demands of God and the world that God claims to shepherd - demands that discomfort people who have been trained to soften their requests to make them seem more genteel. Demands that challenge the way things are. Demands that risk shattering the pretense of people who have no real needs.*

This prayer is driven by neediness – we’re dependent – so give us; we’re guilty – so forgive us; we’re vulnerable – so deliver us. We need you, so respond to us.

This prayer is driven by neediness which is something we’re trained to avoid. We drive past it at the stoplights. We’d rather not read about it in the newspapers. We’d like to outsource it to charitable or government programs so we don’t have to deal with it. We get annoyed by neediness which may be a reason that we neglect it in ourselves. To be needy is to be weak, irritating, or unsuccessful.

That kind of irritation is what Jesus calls us to practice. He tells the story of the friend who goes and wakes up his neighbor at midnight. In the middle of the night, he bangs on the neighbor’s door, wakes up the neighborhood. “Don’t bother me,” the neighbor says reasonably. “My kids are in bed, the lights are out. It’s not reasonable to wake me up in the middle of the night with someone else’s neediness.” *The neighbor is right. It’s an irritating, annoying thing to do.*

But Jesus commends this kind of behavior. “The neighbor won’t get up and give you anything because of your friendship,” Jesus says, “but he’ll get you what you need because of your persistence.” Persistence ought to be translated “shamelessness.”² Your friend will give you what you need because you have dared to bend the world’s notion of what’s appropriate, of what’s acceptable, of the way things are done. *You have risked your own honor* to meet the needs of a friend, of a hungry human being. You risk looking like a needy fool to feed your hungry neighbors in need.

That’s what we’re doing every time we pray this prayer – *we are risking our image of autonomy* in a world that doesn’t want to be bothered in the daytime much less at night by the hungry knock of need at the door. We are exposing the needs of our world to a world irritated by them. We are committing ourselves to waking up our God and our neighbors with pushy, direct demands that we have been trained to keep to ourselves.

That’s the way Jesus teaches us to pray. Maybe that’s the way the kingdom comes. By pestering the world or pestering God until the door is opened and the hungry are given what they need. The guilty taste the richness of God’s grace. The tested are given courage to choose God’s way in the world. That kind of praying isn’t about flowery language. It’s not about

² Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock reinforce this reading in *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2004, 223.

learning to pray in the tongues of poets. It's not about mastering a religious skill. It's not about eloquent speeches. It's about communicating the needs of our world directly to God and expecting an answer.

That's what Jesus promises. Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. Everyone who asks receives, everyone who searches finds, everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. And I know that kind of talk can be pushed to unreasonable limits. We all know people who have prayed to God and not gotten an adequate response. Maybe you've been in that situation. But a more common problem in our time is probably that we do not expect anything from God. That's why we don't pray as we ought. We don't expect an answer. We don't expect a response. We don't even give God a chance to disappoint us.

Almost forty years ago, a commissioner to one of our Presbyterian Church's General Assembly's showed up with a pushy, brash, irritating expectation for a response from the church. The year was 1974. David Bailey Sindt stood silent amid thousands of Presbyterians with a sign that read, simply, "Is anybody else out there gay?" I have since heard multiple versions of that same question whispered by friends, colleagues, and parishioners. It is a whisper that often sounds more like a prayer. Is there a place for my kind of difference at the table? Is there a place for my child's kind of difference at the font? Is there a place for my neighbor's kind of difference on the session? Is there a place for my kind of difference in the pulpit?

That prayer has grown from a whisper to a prayer that has made some demands on God and the church. Give us, forgive us, deliver us. And that prayer hasn't received the kind of unequivocal response that many of us would like to see. Yet just two weeks ago for the second time in a row, the General Assembly heard that prayer, and offered it again to the church, calling the church in the name of God to open the door a little bit wider.

I don't think we'd be there without a disciple who had learned how to pray like Jesus taught. To pester God and irritate our neighbors with the concerns of the world. Not with flowery language, not with religious speak, not with sophisticated syntax, but with brazen demands. Lord teach us how to pray like that. Give us, forgive us, deliver us. Amen.