

The Greatest Gift

Luke 11:1-13

Greg Rapier ~ August 5, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹ He 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. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

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It is so nice to be preaching here today at Faith. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Greg Rapier. I grew up in this church, and it is my absolute joy and honor to be preaching here today continuing the church's series on Luke.

I went away for three years to seminary, and I recently accepted a call in Florida. As I was leaving seminary, I

was given some advice, some basic rules for preaching early on in my ministry:

Keep things upbeat, happy. Tread lightly when offering a challenging word. There's plenty of time to speak those hard truths, and now is not the time. During your first year in a new congregation, your first year of ministry, especially as a guest preacher, especially at your home church, your sermons should feel like a warm and gentle hug. These are the rules. Friends, I'm about to break those rules, and I hope you forgive me.

You see, today's scripture is not a warm and gentle hug. Today's scripture is deceptive. It's tough. The disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, and Jesus shares with them a version of the Lord's prayer, and then he tells them a parable, and then later on Jesus does this stand-up comedy routine where he says, "if your father asks you for an egg, would he give you a scorpion?"

But before he does that he says these famous words. If you've been around the church some time, you've probably heard them before, and if you haven't you may have heard them anyway.

Jesus says:

"Ask and it will be given to you; Seek and you will find; Knock and the door will be opened to you."

What's so tough about that? The scripture sounds like a warm and gentle hug. It's the type of scripture you want to like and share, the type of scripture you want to put on a refrigerator magnet or a bumper sticker, tweet out to the world, throw onto your Facebook wall. It's a comforting word, right?

I'm going to suggest this scripture isn't a warm and gentle hug, not in the way we traditionally think it to be, and also not in the way we probably want it to be. Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you...

...Is prayer really that easy?

There are many people in this room who have asked and not received, sought and not found, knocked on a door that remained sealed shut. There are too many people in this room who have known pain, real pain, suffering, heartbreak, faithful people who have prayed, knocked, begged only to receive a “no” ... or a not yet, or a not now, or however you want to frame it.

When those who pray for food starve, when those who pray for shelter shiver, when those who pray for unity separate, when those who pray for health die, when we come face to face with the chaos and uncertainty of this world we begin to see the cracks in the façade. And so we ask this if this simple, simple formula can bear the weight of a complex and broken world.

If we knock, ask, seek good things in good faith, shouldn't we receive what we want? Happiness is a good thing -- shouldn't we be happy? Shouldn't our lives be just a little easier?

This is hard because in this text, in this scripture, God doesn't promise us happiness or health or an easy life. In fact, you'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere in scripture where God promises a happy and easy life. God's most faithful servants aren't exactly known for their easy lives. John the Baptist was beheaded, the apostle Paul was routinely imprisoned, Mother Theresa's feet were folded inward from her service, Martin Luther King was assassinated, and Jesus Christ ... well you already know how that went. The Christian life isn't comfortable. It isn't easy. And so when we get a scripture like this -- ask, seek, knock -- we want to make it easy, to reduce it to a simple formula, to turn Jesus into a genie. It doesn't work that way.

Now God can and does often give us what we ask in prayer. There are countless examples in scripture where people ask God for something and God changes God's mind. Moses does it, Abraham does it, in Matthew 15 a Canaanite woman does it, and in our lives God can and has interceded and answered our prayers.

This text, however, isn't about that sort of prayer. When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, Jesus doesn't respond with a blueprint for wish-granting or a formula for getting things. Instead, he responds with a parable, a refrigerator magnet, and a stand-up comedy routine. In each of these instances, Jesus talks not about how to get things. Jesus talks instead about relationships. Three relationships, actually.

First, Jesus uses a parable to talk about friends. He shares about a person who bangs on a friend's door begging for bread in the middle of the

night. The so called "friend" doesn't want to be bothered, so he dismisses the man. But the man keeps banging until the "friend" finally gives this man what he needs.

Later on Jesus talks humorously about a parent, a bad parent, who for all his incompetence, can manage to feed his child. If Little Lucy needs a fish, even a bad parent won't give her a snake, and when she needs eggs, he won't give her a scorpion.

And finally, Jesus talks about God, about himself. And when Jesus talks about himself, he doesn't promise that we will receive a yes for all our prayers. He isn't promising food, health, worldly happiness, an easy life. What Jesus promises here is even greater: In prayer, Jesus promises his very self.

In Verse 13, Jesus says:

"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give **The Holy Spirit** to those who ask him."

The Holy Spirit.

In Prayer, Jesus promises himself, God, the Holy Spirit.

Ask, and you shall receive -- the Holy Spirit; seek, and you will find -- the Holy Spirit; knock, and the door will be opened by the Holy Spirit, and, through the Holy Spirit, I -- Jesus Christ -- God -- will be there.

Jesus promises to meet you in prayer, to dwell with you, to hear your innermost thoughts, your pain, your suffering, to enter into that suffering with you, to cry with you, to never leave your side, and to be with you. This, friends, is what prayer is all about. It's about entering into relationship with the God who created you, about sharing with Christ your entire life, your tears, your fears, your hopes and longings. It's about talking, seeking, knocking day after day and building a meaningful, lasting relationship with Jesus Christ.

When you look at prayer this way, then prayer begins to look a lot like grace. God enters into relationship with us through prayer. God gives us God's self through prayer. But God already entered into relationship with us through Christ, and God already gave us God's self through Christ; God already died on a cross for us; God already gave his body to us so that our relationship with God and everything else in this world may finally be set right. Prayer continues

this grace-filled process by allowing us to dwell in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Jesus tells his disciples:

"Ask, seek, knock, and I will be there, and I will welcome you, and you will find refuge in me."

Prayer isn't about what we want, but rather who we need. Let me say that again, Prayer isn't about what we want, but rather who we need.

In the movie Hitch, Kevin James plays a goofy, clunky man named Albert Brennaman. Albert's glued to his inhaler, and when he's on the dance floor, he'll give it a few puffs before failing miserably at the most embarrassing of dance moves. He can't get a date and he wants desperately to be seen and noticed and liked by a woman he works for, Allegra Cole. And so he seeks out a professional dating consultant, Hitch, played by Will Smith. Hitch teaches him how to be smooth, how to get a date, how to dance, how to kiss. Albert gets a first date, then a second, and so on.

The trick of the movie, what makes the movie funny but also sweet, is that none of Hitch's advice actually works. Albert tries his best to be suave, to stick to Hitch's game-plan, to execute the simple dance moves Hitch taught him, but he can't help himself. And so he'll grab his inhaler, he'll make a fool of himself on the dance floor, and it's awkward, it's cringe-worthy ... and it works.

Allegra doesn't fall for the smooth and suave Albert. Allegra falls for the real Albert, the goofy Albert, the clunky and clumsy Albert, the true Albert. Albert wanted to be suave. His hope, his prayer was to be suave: If I had the right moves, if I knew what to say, if I could kiss well, maybe I'd stand a chance in this world. What he wanted was to be suave; but who he needed was somebody to love him for the clunky, goofy, clumsy mess he already was.

Maybe you, too, have wanted to be suave. To be beautiful. To have companionship. More money. A nicer house. More security. Mended relationships. More happiness. Better health. If only I had the right dance moves, if only I could climb out of debt, if only I could wake up without pain, maybe I'd stand a chance in this world. If only I could find happiness, if only he'll speak to me again, if only I stop drinking, if only, if only.

We want so many things, good things, but who we need, and who Jesus promises us, is somebody to love us for the clunky, goofy, clumsy, broken, conflicted, wretched, beautiful messes that we are. Who we need is somebody to deliver us from evil, somebody to pay our

debts, somebody to make these dry bones live, somebody to be with us until the end of the age. Who we need is somebody who has defeated death, somebody who reminds us daily that neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other created thing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39). Who we need is somebody who promises a day will come when this broken, clunky, beautiful world will once again be made whole.

This is the promise Jesus makes here. This somebody, this love, this grace-filled gift is ours. This gift is free. This gift, this precious, precious gift comes in the form of a relationship, a relationship with God. With Jesus. It is accessible right now, always, here, everywhere you go. This relationship, Jesus says, is the purpose of prayer. You pray first and foremost to be in relationship with God.

There was a dear friend of mine, a youth advisor, who was instrumental in my life and in my walk with God. He was a father figure in the youth group here at Faith for many years, a remarkable man. I wish he was here today, to see me preach back at home, but he died. I'm sure he didn't want to die, I'm sure he prayed for healing, but he died.

Even as his health deteriorated, his faith was strong, remarkable. I remember visiting him, and in his final days, his final years even, before everything, how Psalm 23 was ingrained in him. He did not just speak Psalm 23, he embodied it: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me." And so when he did walk through that valley, through death, he did not walk alone, for God was with him. Even amid the sadness of death, there was hope, real hope, because of who God was in his life, because of that relationship God had with him. That relationship, Jesus promises us, is made accessible through prayer.

This is the faith we proclaim, that not even the worst possible fate, the only fate, death, can separate us from a relationship with God. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, though we walk through the valley of heartache and heartbreak, though we walk through the valley of loneliness, of helplessness, of sadness, we do not walk alone.

God is with us in every valley. God is with us now. The God who has already granted us grace, who has already given us abundant gifts desires a relationship with us in this moment. And God asks, God seeks, God knocks

on our hearts asking that we enter into that relationship through prayer.

How, you ask? How do I pray? How do I enter into this relationship?

Just ask, seek, knock. God will be there. God is at the door. It's unlocked, wide open. God is right there, waiting for you, and God is ready to give you the greatest gift. Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 11:1-13 again. What do you notice here? What sticks out to you?
2. What is one of your favorite gifts you've received? Why is it meaningful to you?
3. Pretend we received EVERYTHING we asked in prayer. How would this world be better? Worse?
4. "Ask, seek, knock, and you will receive ... the Holy Spirit." God gives God's self to us fully in prayer. Where else in scripture does God give us God's very self? How is this significant?
5. Read Luke 12:22-32, where Jesus asks his followers to consider the lilies of the field. How do you reconcile this with Jesus' message on prayer here?
6. Look again at the parable in Luke 11:5-8. Can you think of a time when you were the friend in need? What about when you were the friend in bed?
7. Can you think of a time you asked, sought after, and knocked and had a prayer unanswered? How might your relationship with God help you in the silence?
8. Can you think of a time when you clearly had a prayer answered?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What is one thing we learn here from Jesus about how to pray?