

July 25, 2004

"A Friend Behind the Door"

Luke 11:1-13

Preached by David C. Fisher

Several years ago, I was in Kennedy airport in New York City waiting for a flight to Israel. I was by myself in a quiet place in the waiting room reading away the time. A man approached me whose appearance identified him as an orthodox Jew. He spoke to me in rapid Hebrew. I told him I didn't speak Hebrew and he repeated himself in English. He asked me if I would join him and some other men for *Minyan*, evening prayers. It seemed they were looking for a tenth male to complete the ten men necessary for evening prayers. Apparently they thought I was Jewish and could pray in Hebrew.

I'm not and I can't so I declined. They found the required tenth man and later on the flight they gathered in the rear of the plane at the appointed hour and prayed out loud and in public.

To be a religious Jew is to be a person of prayer engaged in a community centered in prayer. To be Christian is also to engage in the practice of prayer in a community that gathers regularly to pray.

That's not unusual. Every human religion is characterized by prayer. In fact, most Americans, religious or not, pray somewhat regularly. At least that's what we tell the pollsters.

If you don't believe humans are interested in prayer, type "prayer" into the Google search engine and watch what happens. I'll tell you: 3,320,000 places to go to on the internet to learn about prayer. Or, go to the religion/spirituality section of a bookstore. Prayer is a big deal. Write a book on prayer and it will sell – apparently.

We Christians know there's something to this thing called prayer and there's no shortage of help available to help us pray. I suspect the reason prayer sells so well is that we also know the reality of prayer more often than not doesn't match the ideals we've heard and believe about prayer.

Poets rhapsodize about prayer and paint an ideal picture that is beautiful and pretty much unattainable.

Alfred Lord Tennyson is a case in point,

*Speak to him for he heareth  
and spirit with spirit can meet.  
Closer is he than breathing.  
Nearer than hands and feet.*

"Nearer than hands and feet." That's what God is when we pray!

More familiar than Tennyson is the famous hymn "In the Garden" by C. Austin Miles. Look at the picture of prayer he paints,

*I come to the garden alone,  
While the dew is still on the roses;  
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,  
The Son of God discloses.*

*And he walks with me, and he talks with me,  
And he tells me I am his own;  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
None other has ever known.*

*He speaks and the sound of his voice  
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing....*

So, how many of you have been so close to the Lord this week the sweet sound of his voice hushed the bird's singing? It's a beautiful picture, I suppose, but pretty rare for most folks. The reality of our lives is quite different.

Jana Childers puts it this way,

*I don't know about you, but much as I love the poets and especially the gospel songwriters, – I have to say it – my prayer life is not much like a dewy walk through the rose garden. On your average day, not only does Jesus not come to the garden alone to meet me, not walk with me and talk with me, not meet me in the garden – but, lots of times, I wonder if I'm even in the right zip code. My prayer life is not much like a dewy garden path.*

I agree – I suspect you do to – and so I come to our Gospel Lesson with high hopes.

I don't know about you but I'm anxious to hear what Jesus has to say about in our Gospel Lesson. I think he can help us. And, I suspect, his words are not what you expect.

According to Luke, Jesus' disciples observed him praying. Luke also tells us that praying was something Jesus did often.

Apparently, at least up to now in his ministry, Jesus hadn't said much about praying. It's something he did not something he talked about.

So, the disciples asked him something we'd likely ask Jesus, "Teach us to pray." They reminded Jesus that John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray. Moreover, the rabbis taught their disciples to pray elaborate and beautiful prayers. "Teach us to pray," is a reasonable request.

Jesus replied, "When you pray say, 'Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'"

That's the short version of what we call The Lord's Prayer. The longer version, the one we pray in church and private, is in Matthew's gospel.

Did you notice how brief the prayer is? In Luke, it's just 32 words and takes less than 20 seconds to pray. The long version is not more than 30 seconds. In other words, Jesus' prayer is short, direct and easy. It's quite different than every prayer book I've ever seen and radically different from most teaching on prayer. Jesus' point seems to be that prayer is not rocket science and should be easy, not difficult.

That's not to say praying long and often is unimportant. After all, Luke also tells us Jesus prayed all night. But, clearly, Jesus teaches that length and frequency are not essential. Something larger than method and practice are the center of Christian prayer.

Quickly, Jesus went on to show what he meant. As usual, Jesus put his point in flesh and blood. He told a story from ordinary life. "Imagine this," he said.

That's not easy for us. In Jesus' world hospitality was one of the highest values. Any guest who came to your door no matter when they showed up was to be treated like a king or queen. If you can, put yourself in that "hospitable" world.

It's deep in the night. You and your family are asleep. There's a knock at the door. Sleepily you answer. It's an old friend who showed up unexpectedly. Of course, the first thing is to offer the guest a meal. That's the first order of hospitality.

There's only one problem. You have no bread, the main staple of life in your world. The part of Jesus prayer, "give us each day our daily bread," is reality to you. There are no preservatives or refrigerators and most workers are paid at the end of each day of work. It's a day to day kind of life.

Every day the routine is the same. You wake up early. The man starts the fire and the woman makes dough. You cook the bread for that day. After dinner the food is gone until tomorrow.

So, what do you do? Maybe your neighbor has a bit of bread left over. It's not likely but what's the option? You run next door and bang on the door. No answer. You knock again. Finally, a sleepy voice from the other side, "Who is it?" You answer.

"My friend just showed up and we're out of bread. Do you have any?"

"Are you kidding? Of course not. Besides, everyone's in bed and I'm not about to wake them starting a fire, kneading dough and cooking in the middle of the night. Cook your own bread!"

Jesus breaks into the story to say, "I tell you, even though your friend will not get up because of your friendship, I'll bet your friend will fix you bread because of your shameless persistence.

"So," Jesus continues, "ask (the force of the language means "and keep on asking") and you will receive. Keep on seeking and you will find. Keep on knocking and the door will be opened. Everyone that asks, receives. Those who seek, find. All who knock will find an open door."

That's not easy to hear and it's not easy to believe either. How can Jesus say such a thing? How can any reasonable person believe such a thing? We all know we don't get everything we ask God for. My first boyhood memory of prayer is fervently asking God for something I thought was good for me and my family. A vacation was about to be cancelled and I asked God to overrule. God didn't give me what I kept on asking for. The door stayed closed.

If it were as simple as just asking God for what we want, Jana Childers writes,  
*All the eight year old girls in the world would be braiding pink satin ribbons into the tails of their very own ponies. If it were true, all the girls in the world and their brothers and sisters would go to bed every night with just the right blend of fats and carbohydrates and proteins in their bloodstreams. If it were true, all the children of the world would at the least – at the very least – be living in peace. How could Jesus say such a thing?*

We pray for sick people and often they don't get well. We pray for peace and wars break out. We ask God to bring justice and injustice prevails. So what does Jesus mean? How can prayer be simple?

As always, it's wise to continue reading. After his little story Jesus briefly and powerfully makes his point.

Remember, Jesus began teaching us about prayer by saying "Father." "Now you know about being a parent," Jesus continues. "When your child asks for breakfast, which of you parents would give the child a poisonous snake? When your child asks for lunch, do you give them a basket of scorpions?"

Of course not. Now, if we parents who are sinful know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more – and here's Jesus point – HOW MUCH MORE – will our Father in heaven give us good gifts?

The point is God is so much greater than we are that we can count on God to give us what's good for us – not everything we ask for. Jesus lesson on prayer is not so much about prayer as it is a lesson about God.

Prayer is not getting God to change the laws of nature for us. Prayer isn't talking God into escaping the consequences of our actions or making our lives more pleasant or pain free. Prayer isn't about where, how and how much to pray. No, prayer is about God

And, Jesus' point is, God is on our side. God loves us more than we can imagine loving our own children. God knows what we need before we ask for it.

Sure, Jesus tells to be persistent in prayer – to keep on asking – but Jesus' point is not really about persistence. Jesus wants us to know we have a friend behind the door.

Did you hear the way Jesus ends his lesson on prayer. "...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" When we persistently ask, seek and knock, God, our friend behind the door, always, every time and every place, gives us himself.

Jana Childers writes,

*Last year, I set my foot on an ugly path – a path not entirely my own. I was keeping company with my friend Lucy as she followed out the last twelve months of her life. During those months I learned what I suspect many of you who have walked with cancer already know – what a privilege it can be to join your prayers with a woman of faith who is facing death. Time and time again last spring, Lucy urged me to accompany her to heaven's door as she rang its bell, rattled its gates and slammed its knockers, not on her own behalf, but in prayer for those she would leave behind. We prayed for her husband, her little girl, her mother and her father. We prayed. Some of us for lack of anything better to do. Some of us out of hearts full of faith. Some of us because we believed Lucy when she said she could feel our prayer. She was buoyed by them, she said....*

*In the last few months of her earthly life, Lucy's own prayers were filled with a deep sense of God's presence. It often came to her, she told me, wrapped in the words and music of a hymn ... Toward the end, she told me, it was the gospel songs that sustained her. As they welled up through her, she gathered visitors around her bed to sing them. This web of song and prayer sustained Lucy until the morning last July when her feet were lifted off the path and she was ushered through the door. The word of Lucy's death went out quickly through the well-established grape vine and by the time the hearse came to take the body, fifty-five friends had gathered. They flanked the walk and filled the porches of the little house and they sang the body out. They sang, "I'll Fly Away."*

*In the lives of all the prayer warriors I have known there is heart break and loss – but there is not much despair....What did Lucy get for all her praying? Did she get remission? Did she avoid pain? Did she see an angel or was she offered a sign in the heavens? No, what Lucy got was what we all get. She got God. God's own presence is the answer to every prayer – the answer that surpasses anything we could ask for.*

Keep on asking and you will receive. Keep on seeking and you will find. Keep knocking and the door will be opened. You have a friend behind the door.

Lord, teach us to pray.