

## “Pray and Work”

Based on Luke 11:1-13

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When I first came among you back in June of 2017, I led us through a season of prayer. We joined with others at King Avenue to pray intentionally about whether the two churches should merge and allow King Avenue to establish a second location in this space. Someone from King Avenue put together a prayer guide for our use. Some of us went to King Avenue to look around and some from King Avenue came here to look around and after we finished touring each other's buildings we gathered in our sanctuaries and prayed together for God to give us discernment about our future together. Even before there was a plan on paper, we were praying for God's direction.

In January of 2018, when we decided that the plan offered up wasn't the right plan and that we would not merge with King Avenue, I led us through another season of prayer to discern what our next faithful step would be. Some of us came together to learn from Pastor Jason Wellman who has experience in a process called Breakthrough Prayer. We composed our own breakthrough prayer and I asked you all to pray that prayer daily and to share with me what God was saying to you, what promptings you were receiving about what our next step as a church should be. It culminated in a visioning day led by Roger Grace, who helped us put in words what we were discerning together was God's desired future for us as a church, a path we discerned through prayer and conversation.

And now, as I share my last sermon with you, the topic is prayer, which sets up what Pastor Steven will be focusing on for the next few weeks. It makes sense. Whenever there are times of transition in our lives, individually, as a family, as an organization or church, the first move is to spend time in prayer. When trying to navigate change and uncertainty, and there is need for divine direction, prayer is the mode of communication so that we can hear from God, so we can be confident that God is with us. We experience a sense of unity when we all are

praying together about what God has next for us. Prayer is called for during times of transition.

Prayer is everything. Prayer, in its widest possible meaning, is the experience of living life with God. There's an old saying that goes, "Prayer isn't half the battle, it *is* the battle." Everything we attempt to do in life, if it's intended to be an expression of our discipleship, must be initiated by prayer and sustained by prayer. Especially when it comes to church, everything we do ought to have prayer as its foundation. But more than that, living our lives as Christians ought to have prayer as the foundation of our living. St. Benedict, the one who established the Benedictine Order, had a saying, "Prayer is work and work is prayer. So get to work." His point was that every activity a Christian engages in is an act of prayer. Monks aren't supposed to just sit around and pray all day. They have chores, errands and jobs to do. But each chore, errand and job is a form of prayer. Prayer is everything. I will be talking more about prayer and work shortly.

The scripture this morning includes Jesus' response to a disciple's request. Having seen Jesus in the act of praying on more than one occasion, the disciple says, "Lord, teach us to pray." Luke then shares his version of the Lord's Prayer, which is more streamlined than the one we find in Matthew which we pray every Sunday. I'm going to skip talking about the Lord's Prayer and instead focus on the two short teachings Jesus gives after sharing his model prayer. One of the teachings has to do with persevering in prayer and the other on how God gives us what is best for us.

It's the middle of the night, and someone's friend knocks on the door after a long journey. It is an unexpected surprise. Let's call them Sam and Fred. Sam lets Fred in and has him sit down. "Can I get you anything to eat?" as Sam pours Fred a glass of water. "That would be nice, thanks buddy." Sam goes to the kitchen to get his friend some bread but, lo and behold, there isn't any left. "I have to run next door to Joe's house, I'm out of bread. Be right back." So Sam runs to Joe's house and knocks on the door. No answer. He knocks a little louder. "Who is it?" "It's Sam. Sorry, I know it's late, but my friend Fred just dropped in unexpectedly and I don't have anything for him to eat. Do

you have a few loaves of bread?” “Ugh. It’s the middle of the night, Sam. My kids are still asleep and I don’t want to wake them up. Can’t you just go back and tell your friend to wait? In the morning I’ll get you some bread.” “Come on, Joe. I can’t just leave my friend hanging. He’s been on a long journey and he is worn out and hungry. Please?” “No, Sam, I’m going back to bed.” Sam presses his luck and starts knocking on the door again. Out of exasperation, Joe gets Sam some bread so Sam will leave him alone. Then Sam goes back to his house. “Sorry about that Fred, it took my neighbor a little time to get around. Here you go buddy.” “Thanks Sam. You’re a good friend.”

The moral of the story seems to be that if we are persistent in our praying, keep asking, keep knocking, keep seeking, that eventually God will answer our prayers, will give us what we are asking for and seeking for and will open that door. If you don’t get an answer to your prayer then just keep praying. Maybe you have heard the story about how someone used to be a dedicated Christian but then gave up on their faith for many years until something happened and they became active in their faith again. They tell their mom how they have started going back to church and are praying again and their mom says, “I’ve been praying for you every day for the past fifteen years that you would come back to the Lord.” Persistence in prayer. If at first you don’t receive, pray, and pray again.

But I have a little issue with how God is portrayed in this short story. Is God supposed to be like the friend who is sleeping and wants to be left alone? We say the story is about persistence in prayer, but really, Sam was badgering Joe. Refusing to take no for an answer, Sam was kind of making a pest of himself. And only then would Joe go get the bread. Is that how God is? Does God finally answer our prayers if we annoy God enough? If we are asking God for help, I would like to know why making a pest of yourself is necessary for God to respond.

I do like how the person in this story is going to their friend’s house in the middle of the night to respond to the need of another. Sam is asking Joe for bread, not because he is hungry and needs a midnight snack but because his friend is hungry after a long journey. Sam isn’t trying to satisfy his own need but is seeking help so he can satisfy the

need of someone else. So it's not a selfish prayer. Still, there's nothing wrong with praying for our own needs. I have had people tell me that they are a little uncomfortable about praying for themselves, for their own needs, because they think they are being selfish. They think they should only pray for other people. But that's not the right way to think of it. Absolutely we should bring our needs to God in prayer, ask God for help, certainly ask God to forgive us when we mess up. So there's nothing wrong with praying for yourself. It's just that in this story Jesus shares it is good to see that the person seeking help from his friend is trying to help someone else. Even as we pray for our own needs, we ought to also ask God to help us in our efforts to meet the needs of others.

So we probably shouldn't equate Sam's friend Joe with God's character. It doesn't seem right to affirm that God wants to be left alone and will only respond to our prayers after we have badgered God enough. I'm sorry, been persistent. We don't need to wear God down with our prayers so that God will finally give in. That doesn't seem like God's character to me. But there is something to be said about persevering in prayer. As Paul says, we are to pray without ceasing. And remember prayer is not just talking. It is a conversation which requires talking and listening. When Paul says we are to pray without ceasing that doesn't mean talking non-stop at God in our minds. In fact, most of our prayer ought to be listening to God rather than talking. And it's that posture of constant contact with God through the day, this is what makes life more livable, more vital. Having an ongoing conversation with God all day long, in my experience, makes the day more vibrant, more intentional. You are just more aware of what is going on around you and inside as you are having this back and forth with God. This is one way to understand what Jesus is teaching about persevering in prayer.

This next story Jesus teaches about parents giving good things to their kids is good ol' traditional Jewish midrash. It's a formula we find in lots of rabbinic teaching: if this...how much more that.... If you, who are evil, give good gifts to your children, how much more does God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

Now as I reflected on this story the first thing that came to my mind was, “Who is asking for the Holy Spirit?” It’s like Jesus puts a little kink in this story. In my mind at least the formula should be if evil parents give good gifts to their children, how much more will God give good gifts to God’s children. But that’s not what Jesus says. Jesus specifies that it the Spirit that God gives for those who ask. So, what is going on here? Is Jesus saying that this is what we are to ask God for ourselves? The children of parents ask for bread and eggs, but we are supposed to ask for the Holy Spirit from God and not for other things, like food. Is that what this means?

Well, we know from the Lord’s Prayer we can obviously ask God for other things. We ask for our daily bread. We ask for forgiveness. We ask that God not lead us into times of trial and to deliver us from the evil one. So we can ask of God for a lot of things. And we can trust that God will respond, that God will give us what we need to sustain our lives.

So maybe what Jesus is teaching here is that if the best gifts parents can give their children is what they need to live, the best gift God can give is the Spirit. And that truly is a great gift. We read in Acts how the time has come where God is pouring out the Holy Spirit on all flesh. To be given the Spirit of God, the energy, the living power of God, to possess this, is truly an amazing thing. To be possessed by the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Love, of Life, of Creativity, what else could we really want or need? For God to give us of God’s Spirit truly is an amazing gift.

And this leads me to my last point, that as we move forward in the days ahead, we all need to persevere in asking God to give us the Spirit so that we can do the work that lies before us. There is a lot to be done, in our churches, in our communities, in our city, nation and world. There is so much need all around us, not to mention the needs in our families and our own personal needs. To attempt to address all these needs pressing upon us, how else can we move forward if not by the power of God’s Spirit? We need to be praying for God to continue to pour God’s Spirit into our lives.

Yes, Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread so that we have what we need to sustain our bodies. But what we really need is the Spirit.

We need the presence of God within ourselves and within this church and even in the community. We need the Spirit of God to be active all around us, to empower, to change and transform, to redeem and restore. We need the Spirit of God to be let loose within us, within this church, and within our communities.

And why is that? Because when it comes to answering prayers, I am not convinced that we can go to God with our needs list like God is some kind of concierge who is going hop up and do what we ask, arrange things and do all the dirty work so we can just enjoy ourselves. Prayer is also not a form of magic whereby saying the right words in the right way we cast a spell and achieve our intentions. That's not prayer.

Jesus prayed a lot, especially at significant points in his ministry: before he began his ministry, before he selected his disciples, before he was arrested. Sometimes he would spend all night alone in prayer. But Jesus also did things. He worked miracles and healed people. He shared parables and teachings. He offered himself up to be tried and crucified. And he came out of the tomb, blessed his disciples and ascended back up to heaven. Jesus prayed, but he also did stuff.

And so we pray, especially at key moments in our lives. But we also do things. We give of ourselves, our talents and abilities, our time and finances. We try to meet the needs of others. We try to make good decisions and act on those decisions so the world becomes more like how God wants the world to be. We witness to our faith and encourage others. We pray. But we also do stuff. We pray and we work.

As Pastor Steven comes among you, he is going to have you all joining him in a season of prayer in this key moment in the life of St. Luke's. But Pastor Steven is also going to be asking you to work, to do things, to put your faith into action, to turn dreams and visions into reality. And trust me, I will be doing the exact same thing at Westgate and Parkview. I will be leading them in a time of prayer as we discern together how we can offer ourselves as the hands and feet of Christ to a hurting world. The change of pastors is an excellent opportunity to pray anew for God's direction and to work together in ministry for the common good. It is a time of new beginnings.

And so, we move forward, keeping up our conversations with God as we make decisions and do the work that is set before us. We can do the work that we are called to do because of the Spirit that God gives us. This is the divine energy that enables us to pray and to work. It is the presence of God that will sustain us for the days ahead, the loving, creative, lifegiving presence that will never leave us or forsake us. Prayer is work and work is prayer. So let's all get to work.