

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.24.22

Luke 11:1-13

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.” He said to them, “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.” 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; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ 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.’ 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. “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. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 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!” (305)

I went on a choir tour when I was in high school. The concert choir took a biennial trip, often to England, as we did that year—1988.

Most of it has slipped out of memory. But a few moments of have stuck. A tour of Warwick castle. A walk through Westminster Abbey, where maybe we sang later on, but maybe we didn’t.

I don’t remember any of the concerts.

It’s funny what you remember and what you don’t. I actually just heard about a book I’d like to read: *Forgetting: The Benefits of Not Remembering*. I heard the author, Scott Small, interviewed, the gist of which was that it’s fine to forget. It makes you notice all the more the things you remember.

Another thing I remember: one of the girls in the choir finding a faraway place in one of the massive sanctuaries we visited. She had sought, it seems, a moment of prayer. I don’t remember her name, and I don’t remember much knowing her. But I did notice her, and might have been the only who did—her having peeled away from the line of our touring, slipped into the distance where noise and light are swallowed by medieval grandeur. She was kneeling as I could see but barely from where I was. She was facing away from me but as if with hands folded and head bowed.

I wondered at this, at the time. What was she doing, and how, and why?

She was praying, of course. I know that, knew that at the time. As myself a life-long church-goer, a fact about myself that I kept quiet (still do), I could recognize all the outward signs of prayer, even when quietly kept. There was nothing of show in this. She was *not* on the fifty-yard line. This was an exclusive moment, exclusive of all the outer world, inclusive only of her mind and heart and the God to whom she prayed and moreover with whom she was (apparently) in close relationship.

And it was at *this* that I wondered, how she could slip out of the jangling, nervous high school of it all, the away-from-homeness of it all, slip into the quiet and peace of communion with God so familiar, so very much her home, this weighty substantive thing that made the flitty adolescence of the whole distracted scene settle and find rest?

There was something of substance going on across the sanctuary for this girl whom I think I'd never noticed before, not really, not importantly—but now did, now had. And I didn't ask her, "Teach me to pray," but the fact that I've always remembered this moment of hers apart makes me wish that I had, or recognize that already she did—teach me to pray.

It's now "how." Did you notice this? The disciples aren't remembered to have asked Jesus to teach them *how* to pray. They're remembered to have asked Jesus to teach them *to* pray, which is a little different. They wanted to learn not *how* to pray, but simply to pray—to learn it as a reflex maybe, or at least as a response to life, which can get overwhelming or confusing, which can indeed be at times poignant or moving, too great a thing for a normal frame of mind.

Awe.

"Teach me that this might become an easy response, a familiar repose."

It's no surprise that it's Luke's gospel that has the disciples asking this, and following a moment when Jesus was himself at prayer. Matthew's gospel also remembers this moment, or something like. It's in both Matthew and Luke that Jesus teaches prayer, offers as an example what's come to be called the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew's gospel, this teaching is folded into the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke, it comes of the request, more direct, more to the point, and following when Jesus was seen to have been praying. Luke's gospel is the gospel of prayer.

"Lord, teach us to pray."

This is why it's called that, of course: it's the Lord's Prayer because it's the prayer given to us by the Lord. And it's interesting to notice there's nothing particularly Christian about this prayer. There's no trinitarian language, which makes sense since the whole thought of God as threefold was yet to be developed at the time of Jesus' living and teaching. By the time of Luke's

writing this, the theology of the Trinity had begun to take shape. But the prayer Jesus gave his disciples as a model (and what a simple model it is!) was typical in Jewish tradition in several ways. A doxology followed by a petition, that is a word of awe and praise followed by a request of God: this is the form and indeed purpose of prayer. “Thank you, help me, thank you.” It’s what it comes down to.

One point on which it differs from traditional Hebraic prayers: it addresses God as Father, God indeed as Daddy.

Most prayers in Jesus’ tradition don’t. Most prayers, if they spoke of God as father, it was in the context of the whole nation of Israel. God’s election of the people Israel put God in the position as their father. But this would seldom have been said of God in an individual prayer. This level of intimacy with the divine: this was a departure from the norm.

Such was the case for the *Jews* Jesus addressed. As for the Gentiles whom, though Jesus wasn’t here addressing, Luke was: for them it would have been more alien still.

Remember, Luke was himself a Gentile, which makes him the only non-Jewish writer of all the biblical books. What’s more, he very much imagined Jesus as speaking to Gentiles, if not in the time of the events recounted in this book, nonetheless in the time of the book’s circulation, beginning around the year 80 or 90 and continuing until this day.

And, as I said, different as God as your Father would have been for Jews, it would have been all the more so for Gentiles—for not only would the divine not have been felt in such intimate terms, neither would have “father.” Really, in the Graeco-Roman world, fathers were hardly the loving presence biblical imagery would have us feel them to be, to say nothing of American imagery. Are you close with our father? The contemporary ideal is that you would be. Indeed, these days absent fathers are considered a problem.

Niveen Sarras points something of this out in her commentary on this passage. Priest and scholar, Sarras wrote of this: “Luke’s Gentile Christian audience’s experience with their fathers differs from their Jewish counterparts. The fathers in the Greco-Roman culture enjoyed complete control over their children and grandchildren. For example, a father decides whether his newborn child will be raised in the family, sold, or killed. Luke introduces the Gentiles to God, who is generous, loving, and attentive to God’s children’s needs. Luke changes his audience’s perspective on fatherhood by presenting God as ‘the Father who cares for his children and acts redemptively on their behalf.’ The father-child relationship is based on the confidence of the child. This

relationship is centered on love, not fear. God the Father in the New Testament is a personal, intimate, sacred, and trusted authority.”

David Lose picks up on this, too. Another biblical scholar, Lose notes that, though the disciples had asked to be taught to pray, Jesus taught them also them not only *how* to pray, but perhaps more important *to whom* to pray. He writes, “We—preachers and hearers alike—tend to fixate on the mechanics of prayer: how, why, when. Jesus’ instructions to his followers, however, focus on a different question: who... Prayer, according to both this passage and Luke’s larger portrait of Jesus, is not primarily about getting things from God but rather about the relationship we have with God.”

And as for who this God is, here’s Elizabeth Johnson: “Jesus invites his disciples to call upon God as children call upon a loving parent, trusting that they belong to God and that God wants for them what is good and life giving.”

God as *your* father, the father of each and every one of us: that would have been a new hearing to the Jews of Jesus’ day. God as a loving father: that would have been a new hearing to the Gentiles of Jesus day.

I don’t imagine that’s a new hearing for any of us. But that’s not to say we have much experience of this, we *allow* ourselves much experience of this.

“Teach us to pray.” Not that we should, but that we may.

Why do we deny ourselves this? Or maybe I’m alone in that.

The word that comes up in the parable about prayer that Jesus tells is, in Greek, *anaideia*, and it’s most often translated “persistence.” Because of the persistence of the one reaching out in need, the friend fulfills the request. But there’s some recent consensus a better translation would be “shamelessness.” Because of the shamelessness of the one reaching out, the friend fulfills the midnight request. I think a better rendering than shamelessness would be unashamed, if at least in the teaching to pray, that we be unashamed in our need, that we be unashamed.

There’s a childhood taunt we remember in the Goodman household every once in a while. “Made you look! Made you look! Now you’re in the baby book!” The boys remember this from their playground days. The shame of it! The shame of being in a baby book.

We remember it now wondering, why the shame? We’re all past that phase in our lives, of course, Jess and I long past, the boys a few years out, when you’ve suddenly become conscious of yourself, around nine or ten years old, when you’re suddenly conscious of the fact that you weren’t

always so conscious. There was a time when you had no guile at all, you just *we were*, all of us, once children without any sense of how others might perceive us.

But then that changes.

And you look back.

And it's so *embarrassing*.

Thus, the taunt: "Made you look! Made you look! Now you're in the baby book!" And we laugh at this, and the boys will gently mock their once shame at the terrible taunt. "Oh, no! Not the *baby book!*" They're past it. They're unashamed that they were ever once babies.

But that's not to say they'd eagerly be as babies again, so needful, so guileless, so undefended and naked in their dependence. No, they wouldn't want that again. None of us would.

Yet there's something of that in being taught to pray—to be unashamed, to be guileless before God who so loves all the world, who so loves *you*, just as your dad did, or just as you wish your dad had.

Don't deny yourself that. Let yourself have that. Be unashamed.

Which is different than being shameless, and different than being proud, certainly different than being prideful. Prayer as it gets practiced and reported on in much of our public life seems more prideful than unashamed, more performative and even provocative than anything of actual prayer. As misguided as the recent Supreme Court decision on the matter strikes me, and as possibly harmful for its tacit approval of a burgeoning Christian Nationalism, which is loathsome all around, I'm not now wanting to think about such things. I want to think about my need and God's love. I want to think about your need and God's love. Indeed, our desire for God as love and God's desire for our need.

Find a place away, cool and darkened, where the noise of life becomes as susurrating whisper—the noise of a medieval sanctuary or an emptying subway stop or a room cooled by a window fan on a hot night for sleep or the ocean lapping or the gentle snore of the person you're closest with in the world.

You know, they say the womb was so noisy that newborns sleep best when there's something similar in their new environment—the sort of noise that reminds you you're not alone. Indeed, you are loved. You are love. So, be not afraid and be not ashamed.

Teach us to pray.

Thanks be to God.