

Pentecost 9, July 25, 2010, Luke 11:1-13
What are you seeking?
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One of the things I enjoy most is to share an afternoon or evening with family or friends – hopefully around a meal. That’s the best way to communicate. Sadly, these kinds of visits seem to be fewer and farther between in modern life. Second best are phone calls and letters, which have more recently given way to email, texting and social networking. They work, but are not the same as face-to-face encounters. What’s the heart of all this? The desire to make contact with someone. To share in that person’s life. That’s what prayer is: making contact with God, sharing life with Him.

It’s really as simple as that. But when you talk to people about prayer, sometimes the conversation takes a different twist. Questions, such as “Does prayer work?” are often behind those conversations. Such questions are different from the desire to share your life with God. “Does the phone work?” is a different question from, “Did so-and-so answer the phone?”

What is prayer for you? For some of you, it may be about getting prayer to work. For others, prayer may be a matter of developing a relationship with God. Whatever prayer is for you, you are probably looking for some answers.

The answers you get depend, in part, on the questions you ask. And as I read Jesus' teaching on prayer, I find that the basic question is, "What are you seeking?" What is your ultimate goal, when you pray? What do you hope to accomplish? Now, prayer is finally a mystery. But in the 13 short verses that we heard read today, Jesus gives an example, a parable, and some observations about prayer. Jesus offers some answers for the who, the how and the why of prayer.

First, the who. *What are you seeking?* A winning team? Good weather for your vacation? Health for a loved one? Protection from harm? The impulse to pray often begins with a perceived need on our part, ranging (at times) from the sublime to the ridiculous. And many of our prayers are good ones – sincere, born of love and concern; prayers that ask for good things. But in this passage, Jesus starts – not with *what* – but with *who*. You've heard this before, but it is so important that it bears repeating. Because *the who* so often gets buried under *the what*.

What are you seeking when you pray? Jesus said start by seeking the Father. The relationship of a child to its father is one of trust, respect and obedience. Jesus teaches us to call God, Father.

You know the Lord's Prayer. You pray it at least every week. In today's passage, we have a shorter version of the one we usually pray, found in Matthew. In both versions, Jesus starts with "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come." This is the startup. This is the way prayer boots up.

Now I'm anything but a computer expert. I have only the vaguest notion of what the startup process involves. But I do know what happens if that process doesn't follow its normal sequence: the computer gets hung up, and maybe it doesn't boot up at all. I know that the way

you start often determines the end result.

Prayer is primarily about a *relationship* with God. And Jesus makes it personal saying, *our Father*. He is your *holy* Father – his name, his reputation, is special, it's set apart; God is different from you and me (who are not holy in the same way God is). In praying to this holy Father, we place ourselves in a particular position before him – as his children, in position of love, obedience and humility. We kneel before him, not the other way around.

I think that's significant. One of the books I'm reading just now (for a book club) is a best-seller called *In God We Doubt: Confessions of a Failed Atheist*. The writer, a British journalist, has left the Anglican faith of his childhood. But having thrown out the bath water, he can't quite throw out the baby with it: he can't quite deny the existence of God. So, neither a believer nor an atheist, he finds himself in the frustrating no-man's-land of agnosticism – which is an "I don't know" position. One of his complaints is what he calls unanswered prayer. My take on his frustration, in part, is his position before God – *demanding* God to do what he, as a human being, deems reasonable. And this is not just the position of agnostics. You and I, who are believers in Christ, sometimes place ourselves in the same position.

Now, in the OT especially, you will find believers arguing with God. Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily. Today we read about Abraham bargaining with God – but from a position of respect and trust. That's very different from the position of this journalist, who comes before God – not in humble trust – but as an arrogant and equal adversary. Your startup determines your outcome. *Our Father, hallowed be your name*. It sets you up in position to pray.

Prayer begins by seeking, not what, but *who*. Prayer begins by seeking your holy Father. Then, and only then, can you bring to him requests for your daily needs, forgiveness and the rest.

Our daughter, Sharon, has many friends from around the world. Two of her best friends are from Ghana (Akosua) and The Netherlands (Francien). On this particular occasion they were making a conference call among the three of them, planning a reunion (the first in 8 years). Sharon was really excited about this, so when she and Akosua got Francien on the line, she started bubbling over with all the plans they had made. But Akosua interrupted. "Sharon, stop." Then she said, in good African style, "Francien, how are you? How's your mother?" And so on, until all the pleasantries had been observed. But it was more than that; Akosua was showing Francien their love and care for her. Only then, did Akosua turn back to Sharon saying, "OK, Sharon. Now." And Sharon went on to share their plans. In prayer, your requests are important! But the way you start is just as vital and may even change, not only the tone, but also the content of your prayer.

And *how* should you pray? Today Jesus addresses *the how* with a parable, a story of a man who boldly and persistently knocks on his friend's door until he gets what he asks. Jesus' point here is not that you need to likewise batter down God's door, or twist his arm until he does what you want. Rather, the point is that when you have a good relationship with a trusted friend, you can

ask anything of him – you can ask boldly and persistently – *because* he is your good friend. If that friend (however inconvenienced) will help you, how much more will your patient and loving Father do the same?

The how of prayer is found in the trust born of a good friendship. Jesus' story says, "Of course you can trust God. You can bring anything before him because he is even more approachable than a good friend." Jesus drives home his point with an extravagant promise: ask, seek, knock! How do you approach your Father? With confident assurance that he is there for you and will hear your prayers. Ask, seek, knock – but don't misunderstand. This is not the message some pop evangelists proclaim, saying, "Do you want to be rich, successful, happy? Just ask and God will do it." No. The rest of Scripture does not bear witness to that message. Wealth, success and even happiness is not God's ultimate gift for you and me. He has far greater gifts for you: faith, love, peace – and the joy that follows. Maybe you are rich and successful; give thanks to God! But God's will for you is so much more. And he loves you enough that he will, on occasion, say "no" – also an answer to prayer.

There is much more we could say here, but I'm going to leave it with a simple quote from a book called, *Too Busy Not to Pray* by Bill Hybels. He says, "If the request is wrong, God says, "No." If the timing is wrong, God says, "Slow." If you are wrong, God says, "Grow." But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says, "Go!"

That little quote helps put a check on a coke-machine view of God. You know: drop in a prayer and out pops your request. Is that the kind of God you *want*? If your 10-year-old asks to take the car out for a spin, he knows you will say no, and would perhaps lose trust in you if you said yes. He depends on your wisdom and common sense. Even with reasonable requests, you will not always say yes. But as a parent, you do want your child to freely come and tell you all his needs and desires. That opens the door so that your experience, wisdom and love can help him grow in new ways. Check out Jesus and the rich man. Jesus told him, "Go and sell all you have." Instead of giving him the answer he wanted, Jesus challenged him to depend on God more fully. There are many other, similar examples. God is not a coke machine – he wants far more for you and has a greater plan than you know. If we are honest with ourselves, *that's* really what we want. A God who knows better and judges more wisely than we. That's why you can come to him boldly, trusting that he will do better than you want.

What are you seeking? Begin with *who*: seek your holy Father and his kingdom. *How* do you seek? In bold and confident trust, knowing that your Father is there for you, that He sees the bigger picture, and is working out his will for and through you.

Who, how and then *why*. Jesus addresses one more question: *why pray*? And the answer is simple: because God is good, because he delights to give good gifts to his children – we are attracted to him as bees to honey.

I find it interesting that this whole conversation did not begin with Jesus saying to his disciples,

"Listen up, guys. Today I'm going to teach you about prayer." No. It all started because Jesus was already praying; because he was in the habit of praying; because seeking his Father was important to him. It made a difference in his life. His disciples were attracted to that and finally asked, "Teach *us* to pray, too." They saw that Jesus was on to something. They saw something good, something powerful, something vital in Jesus' connection with his Father, and were drawn to it. They were attracted to a relationship with God.

Today, *we* ask: *Lord, teach us to pray.* Why? Because God is good, and being in relationship with him is something to be desired. Jesus didn't so much instruct that day, as invite. Only 3 verses are really about content and curriculum; the rest is invitation. It's not so much about method as it is about motive. It's not a transaction, but a relationship – one that begins with God. Rabbi Heschel says, "Contact with Him is not *our* achievement. It is a gift, coming down to us from on high like a meteor, rather than rising up like a rocket." I like that: a meteor, not a rocket.

British evangelist Leonard Ravenhill said, "A man may study because his brain is hungry for knowledge, even Bible knowledge. But he prays because his soul is hungry for God." It's that yearning for a God-connection that leads you to pray. This is the work of God's Spirit in you.

Prayer: what are you seeking? The Bible consistently urges you to seek God, the *who* more than the *what*. As he teaches you to pray, Jesus puts a face on the God who said, long ago in the Old Testament, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray; and *seek my face* and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." When you pray, *seek God's face*; seek his will, and it will change your life. And this, my friends, is the power of prayer!

This is so important. Don't miss the boat! Jesus prayed often, and if Jesus prayed, how much more should we! And so I lay before you a simple challenge: set aside 5-10 minutes daily for a month to seek out your Father. (Let me know how it turns out for you.) Seek God in prayer, following the model Jesus gave his disciples. Begin with *who*: seeking your holy Father. *How?* In bold and persistent trust, knowing that he is there and will answer your prayers. *Why?* Because he is good, and will give you far better than you can ask or think, because – as we have seen in Jesus – connecting with your Father is a good and desirable thing. Share your life with him; He has already shared his life with you, in Jesus. Amen.