

10 Pentecost Yr C, 28/07/2013
Lk 11:1-13
Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson
Interim Pastor of Unity Lutheran Church,
Medicine Hat, Alberta

“Prayer, a life-long journey”

Prayer. A little boy ended a lengthy prayer that had included everyone he could think of by saying: “And Dear God, take care of yourself. If anything happens to you, we’re all sunk.” What wonderful wisdom coming from a little child! The child’s words remind me of far too many of my prayers, and perhaps yours too—namely, prayers that contain a long shopping list of requests yet fail to think much of God’s own well-being after asking for so much.

Prayer and praying. So important to living a life of faith—yet, if you’re like me, at times, prayer and praying can be so difficult. Today’s gospel underscores the importance of prayer; beginning with a detail that is quite familiar in Luke’s Gospel—that Jesus himself was praying. For Luke Jesus at prayer is very important. Most of the key events in Jesus’ life in Luke’s Gospel are preceded by prayer. In today’s gospel, Jesus’ prayer-time inspires his disciples to ask him how they should pray. Jesus answers them by first offering them a shorter, Lucan version of the Lord’s Prayer than that found in Matthew’s Gospel. Then Luke goes on to record the parable of a persistent neighbour waking up the whole neighbourhood at midnight by asking for three loaves of bread; followed by Jesus’ invitation to ask, search and knock; and then concluding with the saying about earthly, evil parents giving their children good gifts and our heavenly Father giving us much more when he gives us the Holy Spirit.

One of the first things that come to my mind when I think of prayer is Christian art. From an early age, I have been inspired by works of art. Many Christian homes often have some version of Albrecht Dürer’s Praying Hands hanging somewhere on their walls. Or that famous photograph titled “Grace”

by Eric Enstrom, displayed in many kitchens of an elderly bearded gentleman, named Charles Wilden, with his head bowed, hands folded in prayer, and a loaf of bread, bowl of soup, and Bible sitting in front of him on the table. Or Jesus kneeling in agony, his haloed head lifted heavenwards, hands folded on a rock in the garden of Gethsemane painted by Heinrich Hofmann. All three of these works of Christian art have certainly shaped and inspired my thinking on prayer from my early childhood days. I think that one of the simple messages that these works of art taught me from an early age was that prayer is a life-long journey with God, in good times, in-between times, and difficult times.

Coming back to our gospel now, I think there are a couple of things that we have to be careful about when we read and interpret this passage. First of all, at the conclusion of the persistent neighbour we might be tempted to view God as being like the neighbour who gave the three loaves of bread to his neighbour. Only after all of the household and perhaps whole neighbourhood was disturbed did the one fellow get up and finally give his neighbour what he asked for. I don't think God is a reluctant giver, who finally gives in only because he's tired of hearing from us. However, I'd hasten to add what Rabbi Lionel Blue once said in a humorous yet profound way: "Now what would it be like if instead of saying my prayers, I started listening to them as well. Then I might understand what God has to put up with." Nonetheless, God is a generous Giver; and is endlessly patient with us. Nor should we conclude that, like the one neighbour who has to wake his neighbour up, that we have to wake God up in order to have our prayers answered. No! God never sleeps. He is always awake and ready to listen.

Another thing I think that we have to be careful about when we read and interpret this passage is Jesus' words about asking, searching and knocking. I think too often we may be tempted to confuse an important distinction between a wish list that we want and what Jesus knows we really need. From time-to-time, I think we all struggle with what we tend to call unanswered prayer. We think that God is not listening. We believe that we've asked and

searched and knocked with all of our might, yet no answer seems to be forthcoming. Sometimes perhaps we are so upset that we're not getting an answer that we even are tempted to stop praying. Of course, that's exactly what "old scratch" the devil just loves. Anything to draw us away from our relationship with our LORD delights the devil. He'll certainly try to get the best of us when we're down too—he takes every advantage he can, since he knows that ultimately God is more powerful than him, therefore any advantage to get the upper hand will be milked for all it's worth! He's an expert at that! That, too, is precisely why we, as Paul admonishes us, are to "pray without ceasing." Pray even when prayer doesn't seem to be working. Pray when you're angry with God. Pray like old Jeremiah, who had the courage to even accuse God of being like a "deceitful brook." Never give up on God, even when you are the most distant from him. That is true prayer. Prayer when it seems like it is worthless. Prayer when we feel we're wasting our time and talking to a brick wall. Precisely then is when prayer really does matter and make a difference.

At the end of the day, what we thought was unanswered prayer, we come to realise that God is saying "no" or "wait." We post-modern folk living life in an instant microchip, fibre-optic world don't like to hear "no" or "wait." Yet often a "no" can prove to be a blessing for us. Often a "wait" can test, shape and strengthen our character and our faith. That's why Jesus encourages us to continue to ask, search and knock.

The word *ask* has the sense of a continuous action: ask again, and again, and again. Why? Not because God is a reluctant Giver; not because God is hard of hearing. NO! Rather, because God has so much to give, we can only receive limited amounts of his grace and forgiveness and blessings at one time. Think of it like someone who is painting a masterpiece. The painting first of all begins with a creative idea. After that it starts to become a reality. Some works of art take a long time and plenty of fine-tuning before they are finished. So it is with us. We are God's works of art; God's masterpieces. However God keeps working on us day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-

month, year-by-year. In this life, we are still a work in progress; in the life to come we shall be perfect, complete masterpieces. So that's why we keep asking, searching and knocking. In the asking, searching and knocking, Jesus wants us to have the attitude of children talking with their parents in the most intimate of ways. That's why we're given the name "Abba," Father, Daddy. We, like children talking with their parents trust entirely in God and know that God will give us what we need. We can go to God our Abba, through Jesus, with the working of the Holy Spirit to focus our prayer; to grow in our faith; to listen as much as to speak; and, best of all, to strengthen our relationship with our most loving, gracious LORD by enjoying; by delighting in the company; the presence of our God. That is why prayer is a life-long journey with God. Amen.