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Luke 11:1-13

THE HEART OF PRAYER

Every one of us who has ever struggled to pray should find comfort in today's passage from Luke. One of the disciples asks Jesus to teach them all how to pray. Apparently even the disciples didn't find prayer easy. And they wanted to know how—how to do this thing of talking to God, listening for God, connecting with God.

Jesus gives them the more abbreviated version of the Lord's Prayer—the slightly longer version we pray is found in Matthew's gospel. Christians have been praying this prayer for centuries. We include this prayer every week when we gather for worship. Many of us have it memorized and so sometimes we can often just rattle it off without really thinking about what we are saying.

There is nothing wrong with having a rote prayer we can pray. There is something meaningful about having a prayer we share with the other 2 billion Christians in the world, and with all the Christians who have lived before us. Having a prayer that you know by heart can be useful in times of tribulation. When other words fail you, there it is, a prayer at the ready. I've had the experience of offering the Lord's Prayer when visiting someone with advanced dementia, someone rendered virtually speechless by the disease, and noticing them mouthing the words along with me. Such a prayer can lie deep within the human brain—and soul.

Techniques for how to pray, how to structure a prayer, can also be helpful. When I was young I remember being taught to use the word ACTS as an acronym for the different components of prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

But I'm not sure that it was Jesus' intention to give us a rote prayer or even a technique for praying. And I don't think that a technique was necessarily what the disciples were seeking either. Notice that in our passage today, Jesus' lesson on prayer does not end with the Lord's Prayer. Instead, Jesus continues with a lesson about the *one* to whom we pray.

Jesus reveals that the one to whom we pray is generous with love and desires good for us. To make this point, Jesus gives two brief parables. Jesus teaches that in contrast to a friend who must be pestered to get out of bed and offer assistance, God is more than willing to attend to us. Jesus adds that no loving parent would give a hungry child a snake or a scorpion. And so, Jesus concludes, if we, who are imperfect people, know how to give good things to our children, how much more so does God.

Jesus is teaching us something essential about the heart of prayer. The heart of prayer is not our effort to pray or even our words. The heart of prayer is God. At the heart of our prayer is a *good* God.

Knowing who lies at the heart of our prayer makes all the difference in how we pray, and what we say, and how we listen, and what we can expect. Are we praying to try and appease an angry God? Are we praying in order to justify ourselves? Are we praying to convince God and plead with God to give us what we want or need? Knowing who lies at the heart of our prayer makes all the difference in our prayer life.

Not everyone grows up being taught that God is trustworthy, gracious, and good. For some, God is wrathful and angry and judgmental. Some believe that hardships in life are evidence of God's punishment. Some of us may feel that God is distant and uncaring, or at the very least, uninvolved in our lives. And these perceptions of God affect our expectations of prayer.

On the other hand, some Christians approach prayer as if it were a kind of heavenly vending machine. If they are faithful enough, if they pray well enough or often enough, then they believe that God will give them their heart's desire. And in this passage Jesus *does* tell us to ask, seek, and knock and it will be given to us. So, how do we square this teaching with the fact that sometimes we do not get what we pray for?

I learned something interesting recently. The word “prayer” and the word “precarious” come from the same Latin root word, *precari*. Prayer is best understood as a precarious endeavor. While it is important to pray, we can never be sure of the outcome. Prayer is not a predictable endeavor, because if it were predictable, it would be under our control. And God is not under our control.

Prayer *is* a precarious endeavor. We cannot know how God will answer our prayers. And perhaps most importantly, prayer is a precarious endeavor because we cannot know how prayer is likely to change us. Prayer is a precarious endeavor because the outcome is always uncertain.

What we *do* know, however, is that at the heart of prayer is a good and loving God. We can enter the conversation trusting that the one on the other end is good, desires good for us, and is filled with abundant love for us. Knowing this will bring us comfort in our praying. Knowing this will bring us hope in our praying. Knowing this will foster a deeper intimacy with the God to whom we pray. And I think that is what the disciples were hoping for when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray—a deeper connection with the God of Life.

The writer Anne Lamott maintains that there are really only three kinds of prayers. Those three prayers are: help, thanks, and wow.

Help is what we pray when we are laid off from work, when a loved one is ill, when we are overcome with grief. Help is what we pray when confronting our failures and screw ups. Help is what we pray when watching the evening news. Help.

Thanks is the prayer of gratitude we offer for virtually everything in life—for things as small as the warm shower we enjoyed that morning to things as grand as God's steadfast love and grace. Thanks.

And Wow, are those prayers of amazement. Wow is what we pray when we learn about an exceptional act of kindness. Wow is what we pray when we are astonished by our own accomplishments and what God has enabled us to do with our lives. Wow is the prayer we utter when looking at the intricacies of a flower petal or when gazing at the enormity of the night sky. Wow.

Help, thanks, and wow. Each of these prayers acknowledges the goodness of the one to whom we pray. Each of these prayers fosters a greater intimacy with the Giver of Life.

So, today I invite us to pray these three prayers during our pastoral prayer. During that time in the service, each of these prayers—help, thanks, wow—will be followed by 2 minutes of silence for our own personal petitions. We join in prayer trusting that at very heart of our prayer resides the God of goodness and love