

The nature of prayer: a relationship. Luke 11:1-13

Southerners don't know how to deal with snow storms. It's true. My college had an official policy that if one flake of snow fell, classes were canceled. And if that flake fell, you went straight to the grocery store to buy milk, bread and water. Even if you never regularly bought those things, you did it when it snowed. It was mass panic. And then you'd drive home, utterly unaware of how to control your car during snow flurries. Most Southerners wouldn't last long here.

One January there was a bad ice storm and, because the city didn't really know what to do in ice storms, the lines got frozen and all of Atlanta lost power. Or almost all of Atlanta. The seminary had no power. And it was freezing in our buildings. A friend of mine from college and I were driving around in my car with the heat on to stay warm.

And then we drove into the neighborhood of a friend and realized that the power was on. The only place we'd seen in Atlanta. So we drove straight to our friend's house and went to the door. Now, our friend is the type of person who doesn't always answer the door. If she wants to be alone, you'll be left knocking. Which, is what happened on this occasion. We knocked and we knocked. And it was freezing. Finally, she came to the door in a bathrobe and looked at us, obviously oblivious to the fact that most of the city had no power. Now, the friend I'd been driving with and I are good, polite Southerners who would never intrude, but on this day we at our warm friend and said, we're coming in.

Jesus tells us that if we knock the door will be opened onto us. But sometimes we feel a little like my friend and I, out in the cold, looking for a warm place, knocking like crazy on a door that takes forever to open. Or maybe it never does at all.

Today's passage probably sounded pretty familiar to you. Jesus' disciples ask him how to pray, and he gives them these words:

"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."

It's the Lord's Prayer. At least in its original form. Over the centuries Christian tradition has expanded it a bit, but this is the heart. This is what Jesus himself told us prayer was all about.

And if you go through each of those five sentences, you learn a lot about prayer and how to approach it.

First, "Father, hallowed be your name." We approach God not as some divine overseer, but as someone we have a relationship with. We call God our parent. And that's the first piece. Prayer is first and foremost about a relationship with God whose name we praise from the start.

The second line, "your kingdom come" is all about hope. We are expressing our desire that God's will and grace will be fully encompass us and transform our lives and our worlds. And this is about us being willing to be transformed by God.

"Give us this day our daily bread," is about asking God for what we need. That's different that asking God for what we want. Jesus tells us just to ask for what we need today. This is a "one day at a time" sort of prayer. We ask God for what we need, and we do so in the faith that God will provide.

Here's the tricky one: "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." We ask God to forgive us when we stray from God's will, which we do every week in the prayer of confession as well. But we also tell God that we will do our best to forgive those who hurt us. We will release them from our debt just as God has released us as well.

And finally, "do not bring us to the time of trial." We ask God to protect us, to keep us away from those things that would harm us. To keep us healthy and safe.

This is the essence of prayer: A hallowed relationship, an abiding hope, a grateful heart, a forgiving spirit, and trust that God will always act in our best interests.

It's the most simple, most complete, prayer that a Christian can say.

Jesus goes on to talk about the nature of prayer. He talks about how we can have confidence in how God will respond. He tells us that if we knock, the door will be answered. If we seek, we shall find. If we ask, it will be given to us.

And yet, sometimes, it doesn't feel that way.

The other night I was listening to a man tell his life's story. It was a hard story to hear, and part of it was him explaining why he doesn't believe in God. He said he used to get disgusted when he heard Christians talk about how they prayed for things like a good parking place and when they got it they said it was God watching out for them.

And he said, he always wondered why God would care enough to give some people a parking place, but God never cared enough to stop him from getting beaten every time he came home growing up.

I can understand why he would feel that way. God does look after us in every way, but that doesn't mean that we can use God as our errand runner. Harry Emerson Fosdick put it this way: "God is not a cosmic bell-boy for whom we can push a button and get things done." We should never hesitate to talk to God and to ask what we need, but that is different than giving God a wish list.

And then there is the question of why God lets bad things happen. I firmly believe that God does not make bad things happen to good people. But I do believe that people have free will and they make bad choices that hurt other people badly. God did not will this man's abuse. God did not neglect him while God was finding other people parking spaces.

Prayer is a much deeper thing than that. Prayer is about the relationship. It is about us talking to God about our lives, and God acting in our best interests. When we ask God for something, sometimes we receive it. And sometimes we do not. And that's the thing about God's responses to prayer. There are two: "Yes" and "No, because I have something better."

While I was in the process of transferring my ordination, I was working for a hospice company. The company started to have a lot of financial problems, and I knew what was coming. There were layoffs and cut hours. I knew it wouldn't be long.

But I prayed. "Please God, don't let me lose my job. Please God, please God."

And then, one day, I got laid off. My prayer was not answered. Or so I thought.

I had no idea what I was going to do that day. It ranks up there as one of the worst of my life. I couldn't take a position in the Presbyterian Church anymore, but I couldn't take one in the UCC. I didn't know what I was going to do, or how I was going to make it.

But God did. The severance package turned out to be good enough to hold me. The time turned out to be a life-giving sabbath. The next months were ones in which my relationship with God became better than ever. God told me, "No, because I have something better for you."

You may have had the same experience. Maybe you expected something to happen one way, depended on it, and then it didn't go that way. But maybe something happened that was even better than you expected.

Jesus tells us that none of us would give a child who asked us for a fish a snake. Or who asks us for an egg a scorpion. So, what makes us think that God, who knows far better than us, would give us anything less?

The reality, is that sometimes, despite our best intentions, we are asking God for snakes and scorpions without even knowing it. We think we know best, and it turns out we don't. We ask for the things we think will make us whole, will make us successful, will make us happy. But it turns out our vision is limited. It turns out that God has fish and bread, and a million other things for us, but we don't know enough to ask for them. Thankfully, God does for us what we can't do for ourselves.

And that is because, as I've kept saying this morning, prayer is about a relationship. Prayer is about us loving God and asking for God's guidance and grace. Prayer is about us being willing to be transformed by God's grace. It's about us being willing to bring our will into line with God's.

I'll end with this. CS Lewis was once asked why he prayed. He responded that he didn't pray because it changed God or changed things, rather he prayed because, as he said, "it changes me." That's the reality. We are changed because we care enough to be in relationship with God. And that is the most faithful thing we can do. To love God enough to be in this divine relationship, and to allow ourselves to be changed by it. If we do this, if we allow God to love us in this way, we will receive not snakes and scorpions, but a life better and more incredible than any we have ever imagined. Amen.