

Augusta First Baptist Church

Luke 11:1-13

It's Time...Prayer

October 28, 2007

It's Time: A Journey Towards Missional Faithfulness

NRS Luke 11:1 *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." 2 He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. 3 Give us each day our daily bread. 4 And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." 5 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; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 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.' 8 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. 9 "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. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 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!"*

To be a missional church is not only our focus for these next few weeks, but I believe, God's vision for First Baptist Augusta. If we dare to be serious about what it means to be an authentic church, a missional church, a church that is more than an address, a church that is a movement, then we cannot go far without wrestling with the notion of prayer.

I say "notion," because I suspect that many of us consent to the importance and necessity of prayer, but struggle with the act of prayer. Prayer is difficult. While some seem to go about it effortlessly and naturally, most, I suspect, struggle with it. Prayer is hard work. A deacon in a former pastorate confessed to me that he would do anything for his church. Indeed, he was a leader in the youth ministry, a Sunday School teacher, and an all around "go-to" guy, whom I could always depend. "But," he said, "please don't ask me to lead in a prayer group or retreat. I just seem to be lousy at prayer."

He is in good company. While we have plenty of examples of Jesus praying, both in public and private, we have none for the disciples – at least in the gospel accounts. In one story, they can't even successfully exorcize a demon, because of their failure to pray. They come to Jesus and ask that he teach them to pray.

Is prayer even necessary? Can't we just *do* what we are supposed to do in life? Can we just leave prayer to the experts, the mystics, the contemplatives, the ministers? In a word, NO. Prayer is not optional. We need prayer in the same way we need to be in conversation with those we love. It would be unthinkable to sustain a healthy marriage without meaningful talk, or to raise children by merely grunting and growling through their development, never acknowledging them in word.

A missional church is a praying church, and so, we look to this remarkable passage. It begins with a different version of the Lord's Prayer than the one of which we are acquainted. This morning we recited the version from Matthew, chapter 6. Luke gives us a slightly different version with a parable to follow.

But before we take a closer look at the parable, what else does Jesus say about prayer?

Prayer begins with Intimacy: Matthew 6:6 *But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father...*

We begin the Lord's Prayer with the address, "Our Father." "We pray because we believe that God, as the heavenly Father, is the ultimate personal reality in the universe" (Glenn Hinson, *A Serious Call to a Contemplative Lifestyle*, p. 45). Another way to phrase this is with the personal claim Jesus suggests. "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven..." (Matthew 6:9). We do not pray: O Great whatchamacallit" (Hinson: 45). The personal seeks the personal...the lover seeks the beloved.

We need to know, in the oftentimes silent mysteries of this vast universe, that there is One who knows us by name, who cares, and who longs to be in relationship with us. "Prayer," O'Donohue writes, "is an ancient longing; it has a special light, hunger, and energy" (186). Even the most profane among us, deep down know the need to reach beyond the veil of darkness and grasp the hand of unknowing. We know full well that we live in a world not of our creating, and in spite of our many delusions, not of our control. The world can be both breathtaking in its beauty and heart-wrenching in its cruelty. Prayer is the language of God and angels, when we no longer know what to say, or how to respond, but are invited to enter into a deeper mystery.

Prayer is birthed out of the personal and intimate. Public prayer outside of the context of the faith community is tricky, at best. I get called on quite a bit to offer invocations at public places, from rodeos to Civic clubs, to football games. In my own Rotary club, for example, there are Christians, Jews, Unitarians, and probably more than one or two who have no religious affiliation. There are debates about public prayers at school and school functions, and goodness knows, there are those that love to make a big show of it.

I find all of this strikingly odd in light of Jesus' admonition that the proper place of prayer is in one's private room, literally a closet or storeroom. Prayer is a meeting place where it is just you and God.

In seminary, smack dab in the middle of the administrative building, there was a prayer "closet." This was a tiny room that could hold no more than one person. It had a kneeling bench, a Bible and a stain glass over looking the quadrangle.

Do you have a place for prayer? Certainly any place is suitable for prayer, and every occasion is pregnant with opportunities for prayer. Thomas Merton, in a very fine book he authored, titled, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, wrote: "Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul." But do you have a special place, a place that is uniquely yours where you can go and be alone with God? Yours may be a dining room table or a Lazy-boy recliner. It may be on your back patio or just a little nook in the house. But, have a place for prayer that is just for you and God. (*A mezuzah for the car*)

Not only is prayer personal, but...

Prayer is Subversive. "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done." (Mt 6:10; Lk 11:2).

Prayer is movement of connection with God, that we may be part of God's work and not asking God to be part of ours. Prayer is subversive speech. The subversion begins with us. Missional churches do not make up their own agenda. They listen to the still small voice of God to set the agenda.

I remember when I was a young teenager, my youngest brother and I were sent to retrieve a cow and her calf out in the woods. The cow had recently birthed the calf out in the woods, and so, we were bringing them back to the barn. My brother kept poking and prodding both the cow and calf trying to hurry them along. Finally, the cow had had enough and turned on us. Now, I am here to tell you, that is a fierce look to see an angry cow stare at you preparing to charge. My brother leapt behind me and frantically said, "Do something." Here I am, a 14 year old boy staring at the horns of a 1500 pound, angry, momma cow, and my little brother who provoked the cow in the first place, wants me to do something. We ran.

I wonder how often our prayer life is like that with God. We poke and prod our way through life doing pretty much doing what we want or what we think is in our best interest until something turns on us. In our fear, or panic, or flight we pray for God to "do something."

To pray is to risk that God may have a different agenda for us. Richard Foster, an author of numerous fine books on prayer, writes: “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us” (*Celebration of Discipline*, p. 33).

In the book of James, chapter 4:3 we read, “*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*” We are to pray beneath the reign of God, that the kingdom of God will transform us and transform our passions. Leo Tolstoy: “Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself.”

In an era where Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Phil are popular icons for the masses longing for self-improvement, self-actualization and self-help, it must be remembered that prayer is subversive because it is not “all about us.” Maybe prayer is not about getting our needs met, as we understand it. Prayer is supra-personal – being caught up in the being of God.

It was attributed to Karl Barth: “To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

Prayer is revolutionary and countercultural, because it speaks against the language of worldly principalities and dominions, and enters into the realm of God. Prayer transcends the times. When Baptists were persecuted in seventeenth century England and later in the American colonies, it was the resistance of prayer that defeated an empire – not the taking up of arms. When the husband and father sits mired in the darkness of depression, it is prayer that gives him light enough to carry on. When the cancer patient sits by the dripping IV, delivering its dangerous cocktail of chemotherapy, it is prayer that delivers that one from the hand of physicians and places them into the care of God. To be sure, prayer does not necessarily change the external circumstances. Sometimes it does in miraculous ways, but sometimes nothing on the outside changes.

Prayer changes who we are – and that is in the end the real miracle. We become less a victim to circumstances outside our control and more in union with the God of all our yesterdays, todays and tomorrows. That is why when believers recite the ancient, “Lord’s Prayer,” we say: Our Father, holy is your name, your kingdom, your will, all be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven.

To pray for God’s kingdom means, that our current kingdom is not good enough, not sufficient. Taken literally, the Lord’s Prayer is an example of the kind of speech that could be accused, as a conspiracy against the State. Prayer is turning everything over to God. That is, turning one’s business over to God. Turning one’s finances over to God. Turning one’s family over to God. Turning one’s health over to God. In the end, stock options, physicians, preachers, politicians and anything else that can be managed, controlled or manipulated are not going to save. If one really believes in prayer, and one really means those words: “*Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...*,” then one is asking for some radical changes in life and the world around.

Prayer is not about sitting back in the relative comfort of pews. Prayer is living in an active engagement in the world, living out one’s prayers everyday, and joining with God in what God is doing.

This leads to the final point I am going to say about prayer this morning...

Prayer is Persistence: V. 8b “*because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.*”

What is Jesus saying here? Is he saying that, prayer is basically nagging God to the point of God conceding to our requests, just to shut us up? I don’t know about you, but I don’t care for that interpretation. One commentary calls this the Parable of the Shameless Neighbor.

Go back in time to an ancient Galilean village, miles away from the city of Jerusalem. Houses were very simple consisting of just one or two rooms. Women baked their bread in common ovens that were usually located in the middle of the courtyard. Everybody knew who had bread and how much. What we probably don't understand is that hospitality was such a serious duty, that any neighbor who failed to provide, would bring shame on the household. So, if someone showed up, even in the middle of night, it was imperative that the head of the household provide food and lodging, or risk public shame.

The summer we lived in England, we had some guests arrive late one evening. It was a Saturday evening, and our guests had actually helped make the arrangements for us to stay in this particular flat in Minehead. After a very pleasant visit, they were going to spend the night in the flat next door and worship with us the following morning. Derrick said to us, "We look forward to joining you for breakfast the next morning. Would 8:30 be alright?" Sure. After bidding them goodnight...

The point of the parable is, that it would be unthinkable for a neighbor to deny a late night request and thereby shame the friend. Likewise, the hearer of the story should understand that it is also unthinkable that God would choose to ignore our need, no matter how we come to God in the first place.

That word translated in our Bible, as persistent, is also translated in other places as "shameless." The one needing bread, was without shame in asking the neighbor, in the middle of the night, to supply his need. But it may also be implied that the neighbor would have been shameful for refusing the request. He is going to meet the need if not for friendship, then at least to avoid being shamed.

One wonders, if Jesus remembers a time when he was a little boy and someone disturbed them in the middle of the night, asking for bread. Joseph probably groused about being disturbed and waking the family, but nonetheless arose, unbolted the heavy door and handed the neighbor some bread.

Can we expect less of God? The neighbor may have his sleep disturbed, but the Psalmist sings: "*He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep*" (Ps 121:4). Could it be that in our greatest need, God is not sleeping and we could never disturb God?

Alan Culpepper, dean of McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University writes: "Jesus' teachings assures us that prayer is effective, not because of our cajoling, or because we have found the right words, but because of God's nature as a Father who loves his own and wants to give to those in need" (*Interpreters Bible Commentary*, p239).

Prayer is about coming to God in confidence that we are *heard* and God will *answer*. But our prayers should be persistent. Prayer is not telling God what to do. Rather it is asking God to tell us what to do.

Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. [13] When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, (Jeremiah 29:12-13)

Richard Foster writes: "I do not understand what God is doing or even where God is, but I know that he is out to do me good..."