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Luke 11:1-13  
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### **Teach Us to Pray**

“Lord, teach us to pray.” So far as we know, this is the only direct request for spiritual instruction the disciples ever made of Jesus. I find that fascinating. Why this request? Why now? Had the disciples learned nothing about prayer in all the time they had spent with Jesus? Had Jesus—whose very life was prayer – never before broached the subject with his followers? I find that hard to imagine. After all, the disciples were Jews. They may or may not have been especially pious, but regardless they would have grown up on prayer – in the home, in the synagogue, in the temple. Even had they somehow managed to know nothing at all about prayer prior to their encounter with Jesus, they would certainly have learned a thing or two during their travels with the young rabbi. Prayer tends to be rather contagious. As a rule, we learn to pray not so much by instruction as by example, by watching and listening to others. Given all the time the disciples spent watching and listening to Jesus, they must have known at least something about the practice of prayer.

So why the request? I think the answer may lie in Jesus’ response. Set prayer forms were common in first-century Judaism. Devout Jews would recite them morning and evening. If the prayers did not directly address their specific concerns they could add their own petitions. If they hadn’t time to complete the prayers in their entirety, they could shorten them appropriately. Apparently, John the Baptist taught his followers a set

prayer, a devotional model for daily use. And that is what the disciples are requesting from Jesus.

Jesus has by this time already “set his face toward Jerusalem,” which is Luke’s way of saying that he is headed for the cross, he knows it, and so do his friends. They are doubtless distressed and distracted, focused less on the peaceable present than on the frightening future. So they come to Jesus seeking a prayer they can call their own, a prayer that will draw them closer to God and one another, a prayer that will provide comfort, consistency, and order in the face of increasing tension and turmoil. And that is what they get – a model prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, as we have come to call it, though in its shorter and probably more original form:

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 is short, as prayers go. It’s straightforward and simple. I imagine the disciples breathed an enormous sigh of relief upon hearing this prayer. “Whew. That’s it? Seriously? Well, okay, then. We can do that. No problem. Let’s get to praying. Man, who knew it’d be this easy.” But Jesus knows better. And so he tells them a story.

It is midnight and there comes a knock at the door. It is an old friend who has traveled far to see you. He is famished from the journey, but you’ve nothing to feed him.

So you go to the home of a neighbor to borrow some food. But he refuses to open the door. “Go away,” he says. “I’ve already locked up the house. Everyone’s fast asleep. I’m sorry, but I just can’t help you right now.” But you keep on knocking, pounding, kicking if necessary, until he finally opens up and gives you what you need.

Prayer, Jesus seems to be saying, is no walk in the park. It may be simple, but it’s not easy. At times you will find yourself discouraged, disillusioned, and disheartened. You may question the adequacy of your words. You may wonder if God really hears them. You may even wonder if there is a God to really hear them at all. But don’t give up. Rather, press on, for you are close to the mystery. Pray, pray, and pray again, even when – especially when – you’ve nothing left to say. Pray until your words have turned to moans, to screams, to tears. And when you are finally left with nothing but the silent cry of your own wordless longing – know that in that moment your prayers have never had more power and God has never been more near.

Jesus’ point is not that God must be cajoled into showing up, as if God were somehow absent from the scene until we sound the alert in prayer. No, God is always present; it is we who are absent, cut-off and sequestered by self-will, self-pity, and self-hatred. And it is through the shameless persistence of prayer that we break down and break through those obstacles that impede our communion with God. Prayer is not the means through which God becomes present to us; it is the means through which we become present to God, who was never absent to begin with.

Might this not be the true meaning of healing prayer? Often we speak of healing as something that comes in response to prayer. But perhaps it is prayer itself that heals,

by opening us to the One whose very presence is life, health, and wholeness. If that is true, then all prayer is healing and all healing is prayer.

I think that is precisely what Jesus is getting at. “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” This is not a promise that we will receive whatever we ask for in prayer. It is not a blank check for us to cash at the bank of human desire. Rather, it is a way to God, which is what all prayer is finally about. Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking – that is the meaning in the original Greek. *Keep asking*, for the request itself is the answer. *Keep seeking*, for the pursuit itself is the goal. *Keep knocking*, pounding, kicking if necessary, on the door of your own heart, until it finally swings wide to reveal the healing heart of God.

It is not what we receive as a consequence of prayer that really matters; it is prayer itself that counts. For it is in prayer that the gift is given. It is in prayer that we are received, found, and opened by God to God. That is what happens when we pray. And it is not just a possibility; it is a promise – “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!” Did you hear that? Listen again: “. . . how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” That is the gift. That is the promise.

What do we get in answer to prayer? We get God – God’s presence, God’s peace, God’s love, God’s life. That may not always be the answer we want; but it is the answer we need. Lord, teach us to pray.

