

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, July 29, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 11:1-13

Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now sometimes we do sort of fall into a habit in our prayer life. We say the same words over and over, even in church. Sometimes we respond in the ways in which we think we should respond in church.

Once a guest minister came to a new pulpit, and he couldn't quite figure out how to work the microphone. It wasn't making any noise at all. Finally, he was hitting it. He thought it wasn't on. He said, "There is something wrong with this blasted thing." The congregation said, "And also with you." Thank you.

A little girl was praying the Lord's Prayer, and got it mixed up. I think in a wonderful way. She said, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, how'd you know my name?"

God does know your name. Prayer – nothing could be more personal or positive. Prayer in itself is an act of optimism. You believe when you pray that God is real, that God cares, and that God is listening to your concerns, your confessions, your thanksgivings. Prayer. If you're a student of history you know that all civilizations have practiced some form of it. How can it not be considered important? It is beyond biology, beyond culture. We seem to be hardwired for prayer, and without it, whatever good prayer does for us is left undone. Prayer. Thanksgiving for life and food has always been a part of it. Confession for sins has always been included, and forgiveness then is asked for. Prayer for loved ones and for others. Jesus encouraged even prayer for enemies. It's often offered.

Prayer in the Old Testament is oddly, and I do mean oddly, personal. Do you remember Abraham bartering with God about Sodom and Gomorrah? Arguing with God and talking God down from 50 righteous men, if they could be found to save the cities, down to what if I find just ten righteous men? He bargained God in prayer down to ten as the minimum to save Sodom and Gomorrah. Now, you know it was a bargain that Abraham lost.

We are still trying to bargain with God, and often we lose. Maybe prayer is not for bargaining. Is prayer an argument with God, trying to change God's mind? We see billboards very often that would say, "Prayer changes things." Does it? What things? All I know is at times prayer has changed me.

Jesus often went off to lonely places to pray, and Jesus sometimes prayed lonely prayers such as where are you God and why have you forsaken me? If Jesus prayed that way, can we? Can we? Dare we tell the truth to God in our prayer life? On the other hand, is there any sense at all in lying to God, lying to the quiet voice within? Might we not as

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well go ahead and tell it all in prayer, good, bad, and ugly, because which part of it is hidden from God anyway?

Pray always we are told. Pray without ceasing, never giving up, especially if you are convinced that your cause is righteous and maybe it is in the very process of prayer that you start to realize and wonder is my cause all that righteous? What about the Spirit's still, small voice? Shouldn't we be quiet and still sometimes? Aren't we supposed to be listening as well? Shouldn't there be quiet spaces in our prayers for God to speak?

Now, I must say that I have not had God speak to me in so many words, but I have definitely gotten messages from time to time in prayer. I have felt God say, “Stop!” Other times, I have felt God say, “Go!” And others, forgive and fear not, I am here, you are not alone, and other times, this too shall pass, and at gravesides and at hospital bedsides I have felt there is something more than the life and death of the body, something more I have prepared for you and you are being prepared for. I have received these sorts of messages clearly, if not in words.

Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them to pray. We need to be taught to pray, I think, because on our own prayer can become just a magic lucky charm or a talisman to ward off trouble or way too much like a letter to Santa Claus. All of us are guilty of those sort of menu prayers, treating God like a cosmic lunch lady, walking through the buffet, saying I want one of these and these and these. I say, now, let's see, today I'd like to lose ten pounds, get people into worship more regularly, and oh yes, I'd like the terrorists to see the error of their ways and find a way to protect America's borders while being fair to those who want to immigrate, and I'll uh take a side order of lower health care costs and prescriptions for people without insurance, and pay off the church debt soon, and grow the 8:28 service, and for dessert, win the Reader's Digest sweepstakes. Thank you. Amen. Over and out. That's sometimes the way we pray.

It's a good thing that Jesus taught us how to pray. On our own, we get lost in prayer and what prayer is for. There is a little book about children and religion that the actor, Dick Van Dyke, wrote many years ago, and it has a story of a little boy who was asked by his mother, “Have you said your prayers before going to bed?” He said, “Yes, mother, but when I got down on my knees, I began to think that God hears the same old stuff over and over, so I told him the story of the three bears instead.” Who knows God may have appreciated that prayer more than our menu prayers of asking and asking without any thanksgiving, without any praise.

Some people say they don't have time to pray. To that I say, please, please, give me a break. I have said prayers on the way to the floor after tripping and falling before I hit. You can say a prayer pretty fast. You do have time to pray each day. You can multitask. You can pray and exercise. You can pray and walk. You can pray and work in the garden. You can pray and drive. That brings up a footnote. It is okay to pray with your eyes open – especially if driving!

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When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He first taught the three very important foundational things we need to know. First, it begins with our, our, our Father. Proper prayer includes others in our prayer life and others together gathered to pray to God. Our Father. Someone asked me what I meant when I sometimes say, “We are bold to pray saying, Our Father.” Well, think a moment about what we are saying. When we begin sincerely speaking to and addressing the Creator of the universe, the author of all there is, the judge of whoever we’ll be, and we address Him as Father, as Jesus did Abba, daddy, isn’t that a bit bold? That’s what I mean by we are bold to pray, saying “Our Father.” That is what Jesus taught us to do. We may approach God as a child approaches a trusted parent, with confidence that we are heard and that we are loved, and then after “Our” and “Father” we say that the name, the essence of who God is, is hallowed, holy, sacred, righteous, life hidden in light, beyond our comprehension, and yet as loving and near and trustworthy as a good father.

Jesus prayed all through the Gospel of John saying both of these by addressing God consistently as Holy Father, Holy Father. When we pray this way, we’re not praying for God to become holy or to become hallowed. God is and always was and always will be the holy one, whose name is hallowed. We are praying instead that God may be acknowledged by us and by all people everywhere as the Holy One, the God of love. We are praying that all people everywhere will revere God as God, the almighty Creator of all that is, the source of true love and true life, and when we refuse to hallow our gracious, loving God in every area of life, we cut ourselves off from the one and only source of fulfillment, the fulfillment we all seek. We cut ourselves off when we do not pray to God and understand God in this way.

In the very familiar play, Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town,” there is a scene that begins the third act in which there are the dead, they’re actors, but they play the dead, some young, some middle-aged, some old, seated in chairs representing the town cemetery, just sitting there. The narrator says who they are and how they died and whom they left behind. Then the narrator looks directly center stage, he walks out and looks directly at the audience, and he says to the audience, “Now, there are some things we all know. We all know there is something eternal, and it ain’t earth and it ain’t even the stars. Everybody knows in their bones that there is something eternal. There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being.” He points to the dead in the chairs, and he says, “They’re waiting. They’re waiting for something they feel is coming, something important and great.”

When we are bold to say Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name, we are saying, yes, that is it, that is who it is, the eternal God, the Holy Father, the source, the fulfillment that we seek! It comes from God. The passages about God’s kingdom and God’s will, first of all, in private there is such a thing, and it is not fully here yet. The passages about praying and believing that God will do what is best and work things together for the good in a believer’s life are not an equation to say if you pray, then you get good stuff. It says more! It means that we are to pray and to trust God, pray and hang on, but trust God no matter what. Keep praying! Keep trusting! Even if life runs

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out, there is something better coming, better than this. God has more places than this life to work things out. So thy Kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Bread, in the prayer, bread stands in as a word that means all the things that we need to stay alive, food and water and shelter, the necessities of life. Doesn't God already know that we need these? Yes! The point is to teach us that we are completely dependent upon God for our daily needs and that others, again it says our daily bread, that others also need the same things we need to stay alive. When we pray our daily bread, we are bringing before God all those others and their needs as well. It is not just for me and mine, not a selfish prayer, but also for the human family, all dependent upon God for every day of life.

As Jesus taught, we are responsible for others in need. Lack of food will kill the body. So will lack of forgiveness kill the soul, and so Jesus taught us to pray forgive us our trespasses, Lord, our sins, our debts as we forgive those who trespass, who sin, who have debts against us. God judges the heart, and God knows your every random thought and desire and mine as well whether they are acted upon or not. That being the case, we know full well that God is a loving God and God is a forgiving God. We know full well that it is amazing grace that God accepts us as His child for God judges our heart, and we know the state of our hearts. As God's children, we are expected to forgive all those smaller things that are done to us, knowing the amazing grace that has been shed and is being given daily in our direction.

Then lead us not into temptation. A better translation is save us from the time of trial, the time of testing. It recognizes that we are weak, that we are weak. It goes on to say deliver us from evil. Don't give us over to trusting things and earthly powers more than you in our weakness for we know that ultimately thine is the kingdom and thine is the power and the glory, forever, amen.

Prayer, as Jesus taught it, spells out who God is; God is holy, and who we are. We are dependent and forgiven. It spells out how we are to forgive as we have been forgiven, and never to consider ourselves above temptation or strong enough to take on evil alone, and that one day, God's kingdom will come fully and completely, and God's will will be done, all in all. Remember that we are speaking to God. We are speaking to God.

We have not yet said the Lord's Prayer together. Myra sang it beautifully, but let us together be mindful that we are speaking to God, let us pray.

We are bold to pray, saying “Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven, give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.