

Year C, Pentecost 10

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Luke 11:1-13 and Colossians 2:6-19

Learning to Pray!

Jesus is praying in a certain place; it doesn't matter where. One of his disciples overhears him and wants to pray too! He wants to talk to Jesus' Abba like Jesus does. Have you ever caught another person's desire? Of course you have. You saw them do something and you wanted to do it too. It's wonderful that we can do this, it's how we learn and what makes us human.

I ran across a very interesting video a few years ago. A researcher was exploring how children and chimpanzees are different in the way they solve problems. The researcher presented a black box to children and chimpanzees that had something they wanted in it. The researcher then modeled for them the exact moves they needed to go through to get it out. The children, all around seven, and the adult chimpanzees all followed her instructions and got their reward.

Next, the researcher presented a transparent box exactly like the black one so that you could see the reward and you could also see that some of the moves you thought were necessary weren't. It was just wasted procedure. She now presented the transparent box to both the children and the chimpanzees and gave them permission to extract the reward. The chimpanzees ignored the unnecessary moves and immediately took the shortcut to getting what they wanted. The children did not. In every case they carefully went through every move including the unnecessary ones. The children were better imitators than the chimpanzees and therefore more able to learn than. They wanted to do exactly what the adult did. It's what makes them human in the long run. Sometimes it takes time to really get what is most important, the deeper reward. We will relate this to prayer in a minute.

We humans learn by watching the other. We want to do what they do in order to get the reward we see them receiving. I suppose the reward Jesus exhibits that made the disciple watching want it, is Jesus' peace. He looked so calm during his prayer and this in the midst of their journey toward Jerusalem, that dangerous and chaotic city, where anything could happen and tensions were high.

"Lord, teach us to pray," the disciple asks.

In Luke, Jesus' instruction is direct, simple, and short. "When you pray, say: "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 who is indebted to us. And do not bring us into the time of trial. (NRSV)"

That's it. Those are the words you use if you want to pray like Jesus. We could work with these words but I am not going to today. It is the follow-up to Jesus' prayer that I want to talk about.

Here is what he said next:

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; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'

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.'

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.

Jesus gives his five sentence prayer that he knows his disciple will imitate exactly, and immediately follows it with a story about a so-called friend who won't get out of bed to help his neighbor unless the requester persists in asking. And the story makes clear that the request is not selfish nor due to any lack of planning.

Does Jesus see God as a grumpy old man who gives only when he is relentlessly begged? I doubt it. Jesus has just been praying and he doesn't seem to be badgering God. Why does he follow his prayer with this story?

Maybe Jesus knows our prayers often begin in distorted places; our desires do not open us to the fullness that God desires for us. Before God can answer them in ways that don't hurt us our desires must change. We must alter our requests before they can be granted. For an example, God can't honor a request rooted in desires other than love without harming us.

When we ask and no answer comes we may experience God as a grumpy old man who won't get out of bed to respond to our need even though, from our point of view, our desire is perfectly understandable. So how can Jesus, knowing that we must grow, keep us praying long enough for a change in our desires to happen? How does he keep us working the black box we just described even though he can't give us what we think we want? He tells this clever and humorous story about a grumpy father who won't get out of bed even though his friend presents a legitimate need.

After the story, Jesus then adds a sentence calling for persistence to keep us praying long enough for God's change to happen. "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

When we yearn for something and God doesn't seem to answer, we can ask what is it we desire, really? We search for something intangible; we can't find words to describe it; we call out and our words comes back an empty echo. Maybe we are hoping the responding voice has a certain familiarity to it, a tone we have heard before; but what comes back is different and we don't recognize it as a response.

Maybe our answer includes tuning our ear to a different frequency. If we give up too soon our ear will never adjust to the news coming toward us that is better than any we could have imagined. So Jesus tells us to keep knocking and if we do we will gain admittance into something more glorious than we were capable of asking for in the first place.

The change is so slow. There is so much work to be done before we are able to receive the fullness of what the father wants to give us.

We must keep at it long enough to change so that God can answer our prayer. But be assured, God will answer.

“If your child asks for a fish, will you give him a snake instead? If a child asks for an egg, will you give him a scorpion?” No you wouldn’t. Even though you are human and frail you wouldn’t. “So how much more will our heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

“Give the Holy Spirit!” Wow, where did this come from! Jesus appears to be saying that what the heavenly Father wants most to give us is the Holy Spirit. What is the Holy Spirit? It’s the spirit of Jesus.

You don’t suppose that’s what we were asking, seeking and knocking for all along but didn’t know how to ask? Maybe we don’t feel complete until we know ourselves embedded in the presence of an infinitely loving, infinitely forgiving and radically inclusive God—a God who even includes our enemies.

Maybe that’s what the Colossians passage means when it tells us to live our lives in him, rooted and built up in him. The “in him” is in Jesus, the revealer of God and the Holy Spirit is “the spirit of Jesus” that comes to us slowly as we persistently pray the Prayer of Jesus.