

“Just Ask”
a sermon
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Trinity Reformed Church
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Luke 11:1–13

Sometimes we make things too complicated.

You know how it is. Many of us can't resist, it seems, building something up, adding layers and layers of complexity to something that really ought to be very simple. Like a friend of mine once said about her husband, “Oh, he thinks anything worth doing is worth overdoing.”

(Let me assure you that the friend who said this about her husband was not Tammi. Really. Although I suppose the comment would have fit me.)

Of course, building onto the simple can be fun. Some grand traditions of art and music are characterized by taking the simple and adding ever increasing layers of complexity to it. A good example of this is certain kinds of Jazz, such as this one.

[play a little bit of Jean-Luc Ponty's “A Taste for Passion”]

And so, too is the Baroque. and so you can hear in the music of Bach or Handel or Vivaldi and many others the addition of ornaments, like so many musical curlicues, on top of simple melodic and harmonic progressions.

[play snippet (0:30-0:40) of Handel's “Every Valley”]

Ok, that's enough!

This all reminds me of that scene from the movie “Amadeus,” when young Mozart, after premiering one of his great works with the emperor in the audience, is dismayed at what the emperor tells him: “Too many notes; cut out a few.”

For those of us who aren't Mozart, however, it's usually the case that adding to something does not make it beautiful. It makes it difficult. It makes it a burden. I wonder, sometimes, if we do this as a means of avoiding something. We blow it all out of proportion, and thus make the task appear to be far greater than we can handle. How many times have you made something overly complicated — homework, say, or some household chore — so that the project appears far too large, and we ask, “why bother?”

(This is probably why it took me 16 years to finish my dissertation.)

Such is the case with prayer. Many think prayer has to be big, or use big words; or they think a prayer has to sound just right. They think it has to be profound. Many, too many, think that a prayer isn't a prayer unless it would make angels weep. It's not a prayer, they believe, if you're not in a place of prayer or in a praying mood.

That's what too many think. The result, of course, is that far too many pray far too little.

All this because we make prayer so complicated. It's supposed to be a simple thing, but we make it difficult. We forget that prayer is profound *because* it is simple.

Jesus, of course, knew about the profound simplicity of prayer, how it was its highest when it was its humblest. That, I suspect, is what he was getting at when his disciples asked him about prayer.

“Teach us to pray, Jesus. Teach us, as John taught his disciples.”

It seems that this was kind of the expected thing with masters and disciples, with teachers and students: the master would teach the disciples about prayer. At least, that’s what Jesus’ disciples expected. For they couldn’t help noticing that John the Baptist’s disciples prayed in a unique way, in just the way John had taught them to pray. And Jesus’ disciples found just a bit of envy touching them. Won’t Jesus teach them, too? Why couldn’t they learn this from Jesus? Isn’t that what masters did for their disciples? And so Jesus’ disciples were looking for instruction in the special tricks and techniques of prayer, the kung-fu of prayer that would turn them into really remarkable pray-ers. After all: isn’t that’s what’s supposed to set them apart as Jesus people?

And so it is that Jesus teaches them about prayer. But what he teaches them isn’t complicated. It’s not involved. It requires no special equipment, nor even any special places or postures. He teaches them to pray a very simple prayer, his prayer, what we call “the Lord’s Prayer.”

Now, you may have noticed (actually, I hope you *did* notice) that this prayer we heard in the Bible reading, although it sounded like the Lord’s Prayer, was not exactly the same as what is familiar to you and which we say together every Sunday. Luke’s version of the prayer of Jesus is different from the one found in the book of Matthew, and the one we say together is based on Matthew’s.

Here, Luke reports a prayer that is briefer than the one in Matthew, hitting on only some key points. Let me read again that prayer:

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.

So simple, and so profound. Just a few things — the important things, really.

Praise: “Hallowed be your name.”

Intercession: “Your kingdom come.”

Petition: “Give us each day our daily bread. . . . Do not bring us to the time of trial.”

Confession: “Forgive us our sins.”

— all these are stated and given their proper place. Prayer is simple, and it simply involves these basic things, so simple and yet so profound. And so Jesus tells his disciples, “When you pray, say this.”

And then Jesus makes what seems to be a change in direction. It may seem like a departure in theme from what he had just told his disciples. But it really does continue that note of simplicity.

For Jesus then tells them a story, a “what if” kind of story.

“Suppose that you go to a friend to ask for some bread, but it’s midnight, and your friend yells out to you as you stand at his door, ‘Go away! I’m in bed!’

“But you keep at it,” Jesus continues. “And eventually your friend relents, and gives you what you ask, because you keep asking.”

That’s how it may be with a friend. And similar examples of asking and giving are found around us, too, like the child who asks a parent for food. You wouldn’t give your little one a snake, would you? And so Jesus winds up this section with an instructive contrast: If even faulty, fallen, corrupt human beings will give their children what they ask for (sometimes after asking over and over), then how much more will God give even greater blessings, indeed, the blessing of the Holy Spirit, to those who ask him!

Prayer, as Jesus taught it, is simple. And the simplicity of such praying, simply put, is this: in prayer, we ask.

Sure, it’s not the only thing we do in prayer. We praise. We acknowledge God’s majesty. We consider God’s worthiness and our own unworthiness. But within all that, given context and shape by all that, prayer is, simply, an asking of God.

And what I find in Jesus’ instruction about prayer is four emphases, basic and important, that give focus to our attempts to pray. I’d like you to follow these, maybe even write them down, and to think about them throughout the week, for I think they may be helpful to you.

First, prayer is persistent. You keep at prayer. It’s not an occasional practice, something you do once in a while. No, it’s an integral part of your daily life. So, you keep at it. You persist at the practice of prayer.

So it is that the great men and women of prayer are great simply because they do it a lot. They spent time in prayer, time that, on occasion, maybe they would have preferred to use in other ways. (Which is to say that they have something in common with us!) But they kept at it. They prayed often. Big prayers and little prayers. Profound prayers and shallow prayers. It did not matter. They practiced prayer. And so, by praying they got better at it. For they knew that their health, their happiness, their effectiveness, their stamina, their sanity, all these depended on going to God in prayer. Martin Luther once said, “If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the Devil gets the victory through the day. . . . I have so much business, I can not get on without spending three hours daily in prayer.”

But prayer is also persistent in that you pray for something again and again. You don’t ask God for something just once. You ask God repeatedly. Really now: if it’s important to you, why wouldn’t you keep raising it up in your prayers? And if you mention it once and then drop it, isn’t that a pretty sure sign that it’s not all that important to you, after all?

So, when you pray, and there is something that you would ask God, keep praying for it, again and again. As you focus on it in prayer, God may or may not answer your prayer in the way you expect. But God will use that persistent focus to mold your heart and guide your life in the direction that fits the higher intent of your prayer.

For prayer is persistent.

Second, prayer is specific. Jesus encourages us to pray specifically, with definite objects and ends in mind. In Jesus' examples, the people who asked persistently were asking for specific things. There's no point in praying in the abstract, for vague generalities that have no substance. "God, please bless people and help them." No! If our praying is abstract and vague, it's likely that our faith is as well. Pray specifically: name those who need help, identify the wound that needs healing, the lost who need finding, the soul who needs saving.

Of course, maybe the specific prayer can become a problem, for we sometimes desire what is not good for us. But it seems to me that avoiding all specificity in prayer is quite an overreaction. If you're praying, persistently and specifically, in a manner consonant with Jesus' teaching on prayer, then specific objects of prayer that are inappropriate or misguided will be sloughed off from your praying, by the working of the Holy Spirit.

So, when you pray, be specific. Lift up to God that troubled marriage, that annoying co-worker, that hospitalized neighbor, that persistent and troublesome personality flaw. Lift these up to God regularly, frequently. For prayer is specific.

Third, prayer is humble. The one who prays as Jesus taught will pray with an understanding that God's will is inscrutable, that God's deeds are not subject to human demanding. It's often said by Christians that prayer is powerful, that there is great power in prayer. Yes, certainly, prayer is powerful, but we must acknowledge that it is not our power that is at work in prayer. It is the power of the Holy Spirit. We are not mighty in prayer. It is God who is mighty in prayer. Prayer as Jesus taught it is not prideful prayer, nor is it demanding prayer. No, there is humility among the disciples of Jesus when it comes to prayer, a humility that arises from the keen acknowledgment of our poverty and God's wealth, our dullness and God's beauty, our impotence and God's strength. In prayer, we ask, not demand, we just ask, with a simple humility that knows to whom we speak.

When you pray as Jesus taught us to pray, as a disciple, a Christ follower, you pray in humility, with a keen sense that you are kneeling before the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, the one whose power is known in Christ's cross and empty tomb, whose majesty and superiority are known in the nearness of the Holy Spirit. For prayer is humble.

And so, fourth, prayer is confident. The simple prayer Jesus teaches is a humble prayer that brims with confidence in the love and mercy of God, the willingness of God to hear, and the readiness of God to answer. When you pray, do so confident in God.

And this means that prayer as Jesus taught us, the prayer of a disciple, the prayer of a Christ follower, is expectant, brimming with awareness and anticipation

that something will happen,
something *is* happening,
 even if the pray-er can't feel it, sense it, touch it,
nonetheless it is happening,
 this answer from God,
 this "something" that is the form of God's response,
 this "Yes" to our asking,
 this "No" to our failing,

this "I Love You" to our questioning,
this "Here I Am" to our seeking.

So, when you pray, pray in the confidence that God hears you, just as surely as Jesus loves you. For prayer is confident.

Prayer, then, is not so complicated as we make it out to be. Perhaps some of you have thought it was complicated, and so you have avoided it. I suspect all of us do that, from time to time.

But it is not so complicated, but quite simple. How simple? Well, a simplicity that tells us this: Just ask. That's right. Just ask God. Just ask Jesus. Don't hold back, don't avoid, just ask. Don't burden your prayer with expectations of length or depth. Don't set any goal for yourself than to pray. Just ask, with persistence, specificity, humility, and confidence, all of these being not complications of prayer but the simple distillation of prayer's fundamental motive and orientation.

It's really not that complicated.

Are you ready to pray? For God is ready to hear you.

Are you willing to pray? For God is willing to answer you.

Just ask, and God will answer.