

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost **July 25, 2010**

TEXT: Luke 11:1-13

...Rev. Charles R. Exley

Being a student of people as I am, I love to listen when people play, “Where were you when...?” I like to hear them explain where they were and what they were doing when life-changing events occurred. Where you when 9/11 happened? Where were you when the stock market crashed? Those of us who are a bit older ask: Where were you when Martin Luther King was killed? Where were you when JFK was assassinated? There are some things you just don’t forget. Listening to grandparents tells those stories to their grandchildren can be engrossing stories of personal and family history.

Here’s one you might not think of, but it’s one we can all answer – regardless of age. Where were you when you first learned the Lord’s Prayer? Now, unless you’re one of those “prayer prodigies,” you probably don’t remember one single incident or one single day. It takes a bit longer to learn the Lord’s Prayer. But, what was the setting, where were you living, who taught you, how did it come up, how old were you, how long did it take? You know, don’t you, that the Lord’s Prayer is one of those things we will remember when we remember nothing else; one of those “last words” that stick with you until the very end? That’s how important it is to us. That’s how important it has been since the disciples first asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

I remember learning the Lord’s Prayer from my dad. I was 4 or 5 years old. As I recall, it didn’t take too long until I could say it by myself – maybe a week. He taught it to me as he was tucking me into bed. I think I had expected to do this on my knees – like the kids I had seen pictured in Sunday School papers – but my dad said that wasn’t necessary, so he sat on the edge of the bed with me laying there. He’d say a line and I’d repeat it. When there were words I didn’t know, I’d ask him what they meant. What does “hallowed” mean? He told me something but I still didn’t get it. What are “trespasses?” That’s when you do something wrong. I could understand that one. And, I can remember feeling as though I had become older and wiser when I realized I could say the Lord’s Prayer all by myself.

Some kids get locked into certain errors of misunderstanding as they learn the Lord’s Prayer. They just get the words wrong; hear something wrong, but it sticks until someone corrects them and they finally catch on. We used to hear things like the little girl who thought God’s name was “Harold.” “Our Father who art in heaven, ‘Harold’ be your name.” Today, for obvious reasons, kids make different mistakes. One mom had to carefully correct her little daughter who was saying, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us some e-mail.” One little fellow, when asked what “amen” meant said, “I think it means “send.” Makes sense to me.

The story of Jesus teaching the Lord’s Prayer to his disciples is told in both Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels. I have to admit that I like Luke’s version best. It’s so much more basic, down to earth, addresses only the essentials, and, most of all, I like it because of the explanations that follow the prayer itself. I find them more useful in teaching us about prayer than just about anything else. And, if there is one spot in all of Christendom where confusion runs rampant, it has to be at the point of prayer. There have even been people who have left the Church because they felt God didn’t answer their prayer. But, I don’t blame them. I blame those who taught

them some of the many foolish notions we have somehow attached to our culture's common understanding of prayer.

There are so many questions about prayer. How do you pray? When do you pray? Is there some special formula or sacred language that must be used? The truth is that many people give up on prayer because they never understand what prayer is. Much of what passes for prayer is irrational, superstitious, and self-centered – completely different from what Jesus taught his disciples. I always liked the little vignette from the Charlie Brown cartoons. Charlie is kneeling beside his bed for prayer. Suddenly he stops and says to Lucy, "I think I've made a new theological discovery, a real breakthrough. If you hold your hands upside down you get the opposite of what you pray for." That is a very gentle parody on the nonsense that has been offered to many in the name of prayer.

I've had my questions too. One of the first was why did Jesus' disciples come to him with, what seems to me, this unusual request? "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." Clearly they felt they had missed something. But, what difference did that make? John had made a point of sharing this information with his disciples, Jesus had not. The difference had to come from what they saw. If Jesus hadn't said anything to them about prayer, their curiosity must have come from what they saw. And what they saw was Jesus taking time regularly to go off and pray. They witnessed the importance of this time and this practice to Jesus. And, clearly they must have seen him benefit from the experience.

This is practical stuff. In fact, look carefully at the way Jesus explains this prayer he gave them and you'll discover that his words about prayer are particularly practical. This is not some tortured spiritualism. For example, the verbs Jesus uses are action words. Practical behavior. They come out of life, not from transporting oneself to some other state of being. Jesus says, "Ask," "Seek," "Knock." Those are things that people do when they are out there in life getting their hands dirty. And, I'm not talking about the wringing hands of one who is desperately seeking a magic lamp to rub at a time of crisis.

But, don't be confused by the seeming simplicity of it all. To ask, to seek, and to knock may sound simple enough, but consider what happens everyday when you do these things. When you ask, do you always hear what you wanted to hear? I don't. When you seek something, do you always find exactly what you thought you needed? I don't. When you knock on a door, do you always find a smiling face, graciously inviting you inside? I don't. If anything, those three normal everyday actions are more likely to offer surprises than certainty. This is what Jesus wants for us? Apparently so. But, then, God always comes up with some remarkable surprises.

And, Jesus never lets us down when there is more to be said. In this text he follows his simple prayer with a couple small parables to make the point clearer. Jesus' clever parables are intended to say three things: *Pray Regularly* and pray with determination. That's what he did and that's what we need. Yes, it is hard to do anything regularly. We all know that. But, we all have the same 24 hours in which to carry out our lives. Pray regularly with determination; refusing to be stopped or distracted. And, while you're at it, *Pray Sensibly*. That's the point where we realize God is more than a divine waiter, listening for us to ring his little bell so he can hurry with whatever our hearts desire. Or, as one commentator put it, "How senseless it is to

expect God to do for us what we can do for ourselves!” Finally, *Pray Confidently*. “Thy will be done” is the most confident prayer we will ever pray. In fact, it is also the most confident prayer Jesus ever prayed. “...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Those are words of supreme confidence.

Fr. Robert Farrar Capon, a retired Episcopal priest, captured Luke’s appreciation for the simplicity of Jesus’ explanation. “Prayer is not going to God (he's already in you), or seeking God (he's already found you), or opening yourself to God (you couldn't keep him out if you tried), or becoming spiritual (he's already sent you the Spirit -- who would rather show you Jesus than help you display your spiritual prowess). And it's certainly not buttering God up with abject apologies for your existence -- because in his Beloved Son, he already thinks you're dandy. Prayer is just talking with Someone who's already talking to you.”

Well, that’s why Luke’s telling of this incident with the Lord’s Prayer is the one I like most. It’s very real. No magic, no sentimentality, just the loving concern of this outrageously trustworthy God – Creator, Revealer, Sustainer.