

¹He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” ²He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” ⁵And he said to them, “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; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷And 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.’ ⁸I 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. ⁹“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If 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!”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you, from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If I were to take a survey about prayer with those who say they are believers and followers of Jesus, I think most of the responses would emphasize the importance of this spiritual practice in our daily lives. It is certainly an emphasis in Jesus’ life and ministry as we see dozens of passages of scripture that address this topic – as both Jesus and his disciples often spend time in prayer. Many of us could also speak to the power of prayer in our lives and the ways that it has helped shape and form our faith and sustain us in our path of discipleship.

In our gospel reading from Luke, we learn three things about prayer:

1. Prayer is at the core of our relationship with God

2. Prayer is about asking God for the things we need
3. God responds to our prayers through the Holy Spirit

To begin, we need to recognize that prayer is at the heart and center of our relationship with God. The first section of today's gospel reading contains elements of one of the most well-known prayers– the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is said in a variety of languages every day by millions of Christians across the globe. When I was visiting the Holy Land a few years ago, we went to the Church of the Pater Noster – a Roman Catholic church located on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. The courtyard of this church contains plaques bearing the words of the Lord's Prayer in well over 100 languages – just one example of how this simple prayer has touched people all across the world.

Jesus taught this prayer to his disciples as a response to their request to learn how to pray – and in doing so, invites them (and us) into a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. In this prayer, he encourages them to call on God using the same name he used – Abba, Father. He invites his disciples to communicate with God in the same intimate relationship that Jesus had with God the Father. When we use this name to address the very God of creation, it moves us into the kind of relationship of a child calling upon a loving parent, trusting that we belong to God and that God wants what is good and life giving for us. Even if we haven't had the most positive relationship with our earthy parents, we can trust and hope in the relationship that we have with God who love and cares for us.

Think about the different relationships in your life. First, think about one of the strong, deep connection you have with someone. What keeps that relationship going and growing? Now think about a relationship that is strained. What are some of the reasons that you are not as close with this person? How much of our relationships are built on communication and interaction with the other person? Usually it's a lot – and it's the same with God. Prayer is one of the main ways that

we can connect and communicate with God – just like talking with a friend. The more communication and connection we have with God through prayer, the deeper our relationship can be.

The second point about prayer, which doesn't come as a surprise to us, is that this is opportunity when we can voice our cares and concerns to God. Following the teaching moment in which Jesus models prayer for the disciples, he continues by telling them a parable and some other illustrations about prayer. It is at this point in the reading that some people might have difficulty believing in Jesus' words when he says, "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" (Luke 11:9-10).

I say that I some people have difficulty believing in Jesus' words, not because we don't believe in the awesome power of God and the good gifts that God gives to us – but because there may have been times in their life when their experiences around prayer have contradicted these words of Jesus. Maybe some of you have felt the same. Perhaps you have asked and not received; you have searched and not found; you have knocked, and the door was not opened. Despite our most fervent prayers for their health and safety, we have lost loved ones to cancer, senseless accidents or other tragedies and illness. In spite of the fervent prayers of people around the world, daily we hear of tragedies of violence, hunger, disease, and natural disasters.

If God is like a loving parent who desires to give what is good and life giving as depicted in verses 11-13, why do so many prayers seem to go unanswered? There is no simple answer to this question, though simple answers are often given. One answer given is that it only *seems* that God has not answered our prayers; God always answers, but sometimes says no.

There are times, perhaps, when that is the case. We do not always ask wisely, and God, to be a truly loving God, must refuse our request. Yet this explanation cannot account for the many cases in which our requests must surely be in tune with God's will. Scripture bears witness to God's will that everyone has enough to eat and that violence and war cease. Jesus tells us to pray for daily bread and for God's kingdom to come. Yet millions continue to go hungry and wars rage on.

Another explanation often given to the problem of unanswered prayer is that "everything happens for a reason." God has some purpose in everything that happens. No matter how bad it may seem, it is all part of God's plan to bring about some higher good.

This is a troubling explanation, to say the least, as it claims that whatever happens must be God's will. One would then have to say that all kinds of evil – such as violence, torture, starvation, and premature death – are the will of God. We dare not call the tragic results of our own sin and rebellion "God's will."

We certainly do believe that God can bring good out of evil. Indeed, this is our only hope and the core of our faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. But that is quite a different thing from saying that whenever evil thing happens, it is God's will.

What then can we say about unanswered prayer? I wish I had a clear explanation to this difficult question in life, but it would not be wise of me to try and presume God's reason for things like this. What I can say to address this topic is to affirm what Scripture tells us: that God is all-powerful, yet God is not the only power in the world. There are other powers at work, the powers of Satan and his demons, the powers of evil and death, often manifested in human sin. Although God has won the ultimate victory over these powers through the death and

resurrection of Jesus, the battle still rages on. Consequently, God's will can be – and often is – thwarted.

Why bother to pray, then, if God's will can be thwarted? Again, we affirm what Scripture tells us, and particularly what Jesus tells us in this passage: that we are invited into relationship with a loving God who wants to give us life, and who continues to work tirelessly for our redemption and that of all creation.

Like the man in this parable, we are to be boldly persistent in our prayers, to keep bringing our needs and hopes to our heavenly Father, because Jesus tells us to do so, trusting in God's loving purpose for us. Not everything that happens is God's will, but God can still be at work in the midst of those difficult times. We can agree with St. Paul when he wrote, "in all things God works for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

This leads us to the final teaching about prayer – God does respond to our prayers through the Holy Spirit. We understand the Holy Spirit to be a gift from God, which helps guide and empower us in our daily life and faith. In today's reading it talks about how a parent knows how to give good gifts to their child. As a parent myself, I know this statement to be true. I am always looking out for the best needs of my child. If my daughter asked me for something to eat – I would not give her rotten food that could make her sick. Or if she asked me for a toy to play with, I would not give her something sharp that could harm her. The point of this lesson from Jesus is to say that if in our human brokenness, we still know how to love and care for those around us – like our children – how much more will God our Father give us what we need in life? The key to this promise is that God gives us the Holy Spirit. It doesn't say God will give us a pile of money, or a roof over our heads or even happiness every day. Prayer is not a heavenly vending machine that requires God to give us what we want if we just put in the right amount of change and hit the correct buttons. God responds to our prayerful requests – not

with an automatic “yes” – but with the gift of the Holy Spirit. This means that there will be times when it seems like our prayers go unanswered, because God knows better than we do what we need each day. Sometimes God will say, “Yes,” sometimes the answer will be, “No,” and sometimes it might be “We’ll see.”

I have known churches that have spent 8 weeks studying prayer through a Bible study or sermon series. As important as it is to our faith and relationship with God, there is no way I can cover all of the elements of what prayer means for us. However, from today’s text, there are three things we can learn about prayer: it is how we are intimately connected with God, so that we can make our needs known and then God can respond to our requests through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Trusting in God’s extraordinary love, let us come near to the Holy One in prayer. Rooted and built up in Christ, we pray for the church. Embolden church leaders to take risks for the sake of the gospel, and equip the baptized to proclaim your extravagant love for the whole world. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Rejoicing in the works of your hands, we pray for the natural world. Make rivers and lakes, oceans and all waterways, sparkle with your radiance. Protect water sources and strengthen those who defend them. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Interceding on behalf of the vulnerable, we pray for the peoples of the world. Inspire all rulers and governing authorities with your justice. Guide the work of legislators and public officials, that they advocate for the well-being of those they serve. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Persistent in prayer, we pray for our neighbors in need. To all who have hunger, give daily bread. To all who have bread, give hunger for justice. Open us to the cries of those who suffer (*especially*). Merciful God,

receive our prayer.

Abounding in thanksgiving, we pray for the congregations and ministries of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod. Bless the prayer and fellowship ministries of those communities. Call us together in times of praise and blessing, trouble and sorrow, in your holy name. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him to new life, we give thanks for your saints who rest in your eternal presence. Join our voices with theirs as we sing of your great glory. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Receive the prayers of your children, merciful God, and hold us forever in your steadfast love; through Jesus Christ, our holy Wisdom.
Amen.