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## Propers 12 (Pentecost 10) Series C 2016

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## Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, July 24

### On Prayer:

Everyone says prayer is a good idea, but many folks just don't do it very much. But why is that?

1. Is it a failure of habit formation? Did we just never get in the habit of prayer?
2. Misbelief? Do we fundamentally misbelieve something about prayer?
3. Sloth? Are we just so lazy?
4. Is it a failure of the will – we want to do this but fail to do it, like dieting or quitting a bad habit.
5. Doubt – do we doubt the efficacy of prayer?
6. Tried it and did not get the answer we wanted – gave up on the idea. We have a fast food expectation of food. God will do it our way and he will do it quickly.
7. Public prayers are often too flowery and seem to be an alien language spoken by folks who are so different from me. I wonder if prayer is for me.
8. Too busy – are we just too busy to do something which doesn't seem to be productive?
9. Are we afraid of God? Do we really want to fly under his radar?
10. Is this a failure of modeling? Do we not hold up a model of prayer?
11. Do we just not know God very well? Is God effectively a stranger to us? (Deism)
12. Is a failure to pray really a symptom of a failure to be immersed in the Word of God through Scripture and other means? Do we not pray because we don't listen?

What could change this?

1. A profound experience of God's personal presence. Talking to someone whom you know is so much easier than a stranger.
2. Prayer is an act of the helpless – our culture says that we are competent and really don't need God. Does that attitude need to be changed? Who will do it? Will God? Will that be really painful?
3. Do we need more stories of prayer answered? Praise rendered to God because he answered my prayers. Would people be more apt to pray if they heard of folks whose prayer was answered?
4. Organization – Horace Hummel used to say “Unless you have regular times and places in which you pray, chances are, you don't pray.” Do we need to establish systems and structures which help people pray? Vespers and Matins services were services of prayer.

They brought folks together to prayer communally with God's Word shaping those prayers.

5. The preacher needs to pray, preach about prayer, demand prayer when appropriate from his congregation. When there is a serious question before us as a body, he should be the first to suggest "let's pray..." The preacher should pray for his congregation and might just send a note to the folks for whom he is praying that day to that effect. Berg Christian Enterprises sells a little prayer gram you can send to folks for whom you have prayed.
6. Encourage more engagement with the Word of God and connect that to a lively life of prayer.
7. Do we need to correct serious misbelief about prayer? Do some people really think of prayer as a work or as the human contribution to the salvation of the person? Do others simply misunderstand what prayer is and need to have this misbelief addressed?
8. Make prayer possible for folks. If you have an older congregation – have them sit for the public prayers. That's OK.

The Sundays after Pentecost take us on a little tour of the Christian faith and life. We saw in the earliest sections the whole idea of Christ as the one who defeats sin, death and the devil on our behalf. In the last weeks we have seen the whole idea of a Christian life lived out explored in terms of the Christian life of service, it is all Jesus and yet he invites me into that kingdom to make real and positive contribution, to be his servant.

This week turns our attention to prayer. As Luther says in the explanation of the Lord's Prayer, "God tenderly invites us to call upon him as dear children ask their dear father." In preparation for that, I would like to suggest that there are a few things that we need to remember about prayer. In truth, Luther also insisted that he could get nothing done if he did not start his day with a couple hours of prayer. I have always been shamed by that comment. The preacher will want to remember that this is a topic about which many of us feel terribly guilty, or we are insensitive to it. We won't want to raise the sensitivity of the sluggard and in so doing destroy the guilty conscience. Luther also once said that he wished he could pray like his dog watched him eat sausage.

1. Prayer is a Real Communication with God – of course this presupposes that there is a God. It would be nice to assume that is not a problem. But be careful of that assumption as it may not obtain with all who hear and may in fact be what really lies behind many who do not pray. Many of the folks who sit in Christian pews are functionally deists, followers of a God whom they believe is not really engaged in this world, certainly not paying attention to my prayers.

Too often, I think, we hear prayer discussed as a blessing to the one who prays. The classic line: "The family that prays together, stays together" may indeed be true but it tends have us seeing prayer as a therapeutic or healthy practice for the one who prays.

The motivation for prayer then becomes akin to the motivation to exercise, just as exercise is beneficial to the guy trotting around the track, prayer benefits the one who prays. It is sort of a stress releasing meditative act. This loses sight of the fact that this is a real communication. To return to the exercise motif, walking might be good for you, but it also might just get you somewhere, like the grocery, a friend's house, or work.

2. Prayer is a Privilege – if you remember that it is a real communication with God, then it becomes a real privilege. God has graciously opened up a line of communication with us. We have an opportunity which is pretty amazing if you think about it. The creature has a direct line of access to the Creator. Again I think because we have tended to talk about prayer as a healthy exercise, we have encouraged prayer as something we are supposed to do. But the children Luther sees asking their dear father as dear children are not there out of a sense of obligation or duty. Yes, God does command prayer, but remember he also commands love. To pray because it is the “right thing” may be noble but it is may not be the best of motivation. The best motivation to pray may be that we have a chance to talk to our savior who is always with us, who in fact, dwells within us.
3. Prayer flows out of Baptism. It is not the case that God does not hear the prayer of the unbeliever, but the person who has been baptized has a special promise: God promises to hear you. God surely is able to hear all prayers, even the misdirected prayers of the pagan. But the sacrament of baptism establishes a different sort of relationship with God through Jesus. Now the prayers we utter are heard differently than those of the pagan or unbeliever. Now they are heard in the relationship of father to child. I can tune out any unruly child in church, except three of them, and those are my own children. My wife knew that if one of them got fussy in church, she needed to do something, because it would totally break my concentration. I could not ignore the cry of my own child. I did not have that problem when it was another child. I sound calloused, but I could really ignore them.
4. God delights to hear our prayers – in the movie “Bruce Almighty” the main character is overwhelmed by the sheer volume of prayers. You cannot think that way about this. God does not have limited band width which my trivialities will be wasting or which means my prayer is somehow distracting him from something more important. It is not the case that my prayers compete for God's attention amid the millions of others who pray at that moment. I have his complete and undivided attention. He is infinite and can do this for everyone. He also has infinite love means that he really does want to hear from you about whatever you want to talk about. His gift of the Spirit into our hearts means that he has opened up a channel for prayer from us. The child who prays for his lizard or the woman who beseeches God for a parking space as she is circling the lot are not wasting God's time. They are exercising their faith in the temporal moment in which they are alive. The lizard may indeed be ill and the woman may well need a parking spot. The faith piece is

that they believe God cares about such things and will act on their behalf. What is more, he delights to hear a “thank you!” when the parking spot is found.

5. Prayer is at the center of Relationship/Faith – We pray because God loves us and we pray because we believe that God cares about us and has the loving resources to do something about it. Prayer is acting on this reality which I believe to be true. I remember building the school in Roseburg a few years ago. We were using Laborers for Christ and the leader of the team came up to me and asked for a prayer. The power company was slow getting a new power pole set for us and if it did not happen soon the whole project would go idle. We would be at a standstill waiting for this critical step. So we prayed. I walked out of that prayer and went out on the breezeway in front of the church to greet the preschool parents who were picking up their children that day. I said hello to a woman I had never spoken to before and she asked how things with the new building were going. I told her about the power pole problem and she brightened up. Her husband worked directly with the fellow who scheduled all the crews for the utility company. The pole was up within three days. God has the ability to answer prayer and acts upon our prayers. If we don't believe that, we will not pray. The Christian who does not pray has much deeper issues at work than simply a problem of defective piety. The Christian who does not pray has a deep spiritual sickness. Faith simply does pray.

If you are not familiar with the little acronym ACTS, you might find it useful. Healthy prayer usually involves four elements, and the order is somewhat important.

A – adoration: This is the most neglected part of prayer. This element of prayer simply makes a statement about God. It starts with “You have done...” or “You are...” It is a statement of the truth about God. The person praying stands in awe of him.

C – confession: this is the statement of the human condition. Again, we often neglect this element of prayer and can sound very much like we are coming to God on equal terms. This element of prayer simply says, “I'm afraid” or “I'm weak” or “I don't know what to do.” This element of the prayer does not have to be, “I am a terrible sinner.” It can simply be a statement of my condition. “God, I'm broke and I need money to pay the rent” is a confession of my current state.

T – thanksgiving: This is where the person thanks God for specific elements in his/her life. This prayer is specific, not generic. It looks to the past, preferably the immediate past, and it sees God's hand at work behind the blessings and the strength and the whole of life.

These first three elements can be mingled and rearranged. But it is important that they take place prior to the last element, or at least that the last element of the prayer is embedded in these elements. For the last element of the ACTS prayer is of course supplication. God is not some divine vending machine from which blessings come if we

ask. God is in a living, loving relationship with his people. Just as I praise, confide in, and communicate with my family and loved ones, so too, the conversation with God is much more than simply “gimme...”

S – supplication: Having adored, confessed my condition, and thanked God for his gifts of the past, I now am able to come to him in real supplication. The other three elements will likely shape this prayer, perhaps even change its content.

I have found this a useful topic for a bible class, but I think it was best when I taught my confirmation classes this prayer form. I closed every class by writing the acronym on the board the acronym and had one of the students fill it out with suggestions from the rest of the class and then we prayed it. Prayer is not a concept one teaches in a single sermon or even a bible study series and then expects it to be done. This is a habit, a way of life, and life is stubbornly resistant to change. It takes time, discipline, accountability and practice.

God has oddly chosen to work inside this life of ours. He does not come from outside and force behavior, but he has come inside, resistibly, gently, and far more effectively.

### **Collect of the Day**

O Lord, let Your merciful ears be attentive to the prayers of Your servants, and by Your Word and Spirit teach us how to pray that our petitions may be pleasing before You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*The prayer here is pretty straight forward. A prayer about prayer, however, can easily turn into a sermon about prayer, but I think they narrowly avoid it here. This remains a prayer addressed to God.*

*What makes a petition pleasing before God? Is it the content of the prayer, the attitude of the believer, or the faithful relationship? Just what makes a petition pleasing to God? The prayer assumes that this is teachable, at least by Word and Spirit, and that we can learn it. Is that a safe assumption?*

*The ears God turns to our prayers are merciful, and it is on that account that they listen. Remember that mercy is only shown the guilty, never the innocent. Mercy is what the powerful show to the weak, not the other way around. I love the hymn “What a friend we have in Jesus” and it does indeed talk about prayer, but the theology of prayer must rest upon the God/creature relationship in which I am not God’s buddy, but his beloved creature.*

*What is the result of a pleasing petition that is not already found in the mercy of God? Anything? I am not sure. After all, God’s answer to my prayers is always merciful or I am doomed. How is a pleasing petition different than a non-pleasing petition?*

*Notice the common closing to these prayers, the Trinitarian formula. Through Jesus who lives and reigns with You and the Spirit. The prayer is addressed to the Father, and the inclusion of the “you” in there is really important. We are not talking about God, but to God.*

*I fear this reflection on the collect has simply asked more questions than it has answered. I would guess there is a sermon in answering just about any of them.*

## **Readings**

Genesis 18:(17-19) 20-33 *I have again included overlapping and intervening verses between this week’s lesson and last week’s lesson.*

<sup>14</sup> *Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.”* <sup>15</sup> *But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”*

<sup>16</sup> *Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way.* <sup>17</sup> *The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,* <sup>18</sup> *seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? <sup>19</sup> For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”* <sup>20</sup> *Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave,* <sup>21</sup> *I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.”*

<sup>22</sup> *So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD.* <sup>23</sup> *Then Abraham drew near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup> Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? <sup>25</sup> Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”* <sup>26</sup> *And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”*

<sup>27</sup> *Abraham answered and said, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. <sup>28</sup> Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?”* *And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.”* <sup>29</sup> *Again he spoke to him and said, “Suppose forty are found there.”* *He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.”* <sup>30</sup> *Then he said, “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there.”* *He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.”* <sup>31</sup> *He said, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.”* *He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.”* <sup>32</sup> *Then he said, “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.”* *He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not*

destroy it.”<sup>33</sup> And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

*This is a wonderful text on prayer; familiar to anyone who has done a Bible study on the subject, but it is a strange reading as well. Abraham and God are in a relationship here, clearly a relationship of a superior to an inferior, yet, Abraham is exceedingly bold. He is also almost manipulative. God’s reputation is at stake he argues. “Shall the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” The implication behind that statement is that God would be contradicting his very name and nature if he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah in this way. That is a pretty gutsy thing to say to the omnipotent divinity. If you remember, such a charge laid at God’s feet on Job’s part did not go so well. Even poor Zechariah in the temple got struck dumb just for asking for a sign.*

*To modern ears who are uncomfortable dickering over the price of a car, this text sounds strange, but it is classic middle-eastern culture, especially the culture of a king’s court and the marketplace. Abraham is not breaking rules here, at least not the rules of his culture. He is in fact acting like any courtesan might in the court of an ancient potentate. This is the way that people got things done. This would have sounded normal and appropriate to an audience of Middle Eastern hearers in the first and second millennium before Christ. Their stories often involved someone talking to a king or emperor this way.*

*But what does this teach us about prayer? Perhaps it tells us nothing more than God is so desperate to hear us pray to him, that he is willing to listen to just about any prayer, even the wheedling prayer which Abraham prays for the sake of his nephew Lot. I am not sure that Abraham really is all that concerned about the righteous folk of Sodom. Indeed, he does not seem very confident that there are any. I think the real sermon is in the internal deliberation which God has prior to the conversation. “Shall I hide from Abraham...” may in fact be the real meat of this text.*

*The passage could also be seen to give us occasion to be bold, I think. God does not rebuke or chide Abraham here. Indeed, as God, he knew exactly what would happen. He did not need this prayer, he learned nothing in the course of this conversation he did not already know, he received nothing, yet he loves Abraham. He wants to talk to him. You get the picture here not of how to pray but of the attitude of God. Thus, Abraham is bold to pray, he pushes, he asks, he wheedles another five fewer righteous as the threshold of God’s judgment on the city.*

## Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;

before the gods I sing your praise;

<sup>2</sup> I bow down toward your holy temple

and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness,

for you have exalted above all things

your name and your word.

<sup>3</sup> On the day I called, you answered me;  
my strength of soul you increased.

<sup>4</sup> All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD,  
for they have heard the words of your mouth,

<sup>5</sup> and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD,  
for great is the glory of the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,  
but the haughty he knows from afar.

<sup>7</sup> Though I walk in the midst of trouble,  
you preserve my life;

you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies,  
and your right hand delivers me.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;  
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.

Do not forsake the work of your hands.

*If would preach on prayer, the psalms of David would be a natural place to start. They are all intended, in the original writing, as prayers to God. But interestingly, they have also become God's word to us. Exactly how that transition takes place is a mystery and a wonder to us. Luther understood the Psalter to be the prayers of Christ which David also prayed. He took great comfort that Christ himself struggled. That might sound odd to us, but that is because we too often forget that the temptation of Christ was a real temptation. In the incarnation he stepped into true human weakness, taking up to himself true human nature.*

*Notice that David holds nothing back. This is no half hearted prayer, but with his whole heart. The real meat comes in verse three "On the day I called, you answered" this is not the first part of the prayer but the last part we are reading, this is the thankful acknowledgement of what God has already done in answer to prayers. Notice too that God regards the lowly. No prayer is too low for him.*

*I also am interested that at the end of the prayer David's humility starts to take real shape. God will fulfill his purpose for David. First God has a purpose for David; that is good. Secondly, notice that it is God's purpose and not David's will or purpose for David's life. Prayer from a creature to the Creator involves a sense of letting go of the very willful and self-determining life which the modern world sees as essential. David is not suggesting that he has somehow become God's automaton, but at the same time it is definitely God's purpose that makes the difference here.*

Colossians 2:6-15 (16-19)

<sup>6</sup>Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

<sup>8</sup>See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. <sup>9</sup>For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup>and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. <sup>11</sup>In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, <sup>12</sup>having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. <sup>13</sup>And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup>by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup>He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

<sup>16</sup>Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. <sup>17</sup>These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. <sup>18</sup>Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, <sup>19</sup>and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

*As you received Christ – this is the reception we have been talking about the last couple of weeks in this little letter. This is the Jesus who shed the red and sticky blood of Calvary to reconcile to himself all things, even the bad things, every thing.*

*This roots us, it builds us up, and it establishes us in the faith, the relationship with him. His great act of love in Jesus establishes me, not me establishing me, but God is the actor/doer here. Just as we were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*

*We are to see to it that no one takes us captive through by some empty deceit, the philosophy of this human tradition which is constrained by the faithless eyes of this world. What is this philosophy of the world? If you follow this down to verse 16, it gets easier. The empty philosophy of the world is that we must do something, some new moon festival, some Sabbath observance, some thing which will make us acceptable. This is the sword which the rulers and authorities wielded so effectively against us and which Christ ripped from their hands when he rose from the dead and died on the cross. The worldly philosophy seems to be that you must earn it, you must get something right before God can love you. Be aware, we can turn faith, prayer, or just about anything into such a “payment” rendered to God to which he then responds with his love. The philosophy of Christ is that he loved us first, before we did any of these things. It happened in baptism.*

*The world sees forces at work, elemental spirits, evolutionary dogmas, and materialistic monisms, but they do not see Christ or even a generic god for that matter. I am not anti-science, please don't see it that way. I believe the whole fight which often pits creation against evolution is misguided and foolish. Science does what science does and I am glad of that. But in truth scientists, even many who are Christians, are really pretty blind to some basic things. They have fallen captive to a philosophy of the age. They operate in a world in which God simply never factors into the formulae and equations of their work. As a result they have often effectively trained their minds to operate in a Godless world. The best of them have recognized this and realize the philosophical mistake of this functional atheism. Francis Collins, John Polkinghorne, Owen Gingrich, Ian Barbour and many others have written extensively about this. Collins headed up the human genome project and wrote a great little book, "The Language of God" which I recommend. About every two years or so, Polkinghorne writes another book on the subject. He had been the head of a science department at Cambridge prior to entering the ministry and field of theology. These men speak of a field of which know a great deal.*

*The basic thrust of what these scholars write is that science cannot truly answer the largest questions of the human experience. It is very good at describing things, but not at explaining things. This is not a matter of indifference either. The current spirit of the age which would ask science to answer all questions often results in a very dark nihilism. Jesus said that by their fruit we will know them. We are facing an epidemic of suicide among the young people of our world who have given up any hope for success in a world which only finds value in how much money you make, success on some competitive field of play, or in being a truly interesting person with a million Twitter followers. Our generation is in crushing need of hearing that the value of a human being resides somewhere else. In this Babe of Bethlehem and the Carpenter who hung on a cross, in this Christ the totality of the deity dwells, the fullness of God. He gives meaning to life, purpose, grace, and beauty.*

*Paul tells us that we all have been filled with the Christ who is the head of all rule and authority. Thus when we speak a word of forgiveness, it echoes throughout heaven itself, as if God has spoken it, because God has spoken it in us. People whom the world judges to be failures can speak those words of cosmic significance and the devils quake when she or he says it. The indwelling of Christ not only infuses our language, it also infuses our minds and our whole being. Here is the answer to those empty philosophies, Christ is the guide who keeps us through His Spirit.*

*In Paul's day, this was a fight about circumcision, so that shows up here in the language, but we will want to focus on the baptismal language, the cosmic creation language. Buried with Christ, we were also raised with him, through the potent work of God. Dead in sins, God has made us alive with Christ in his sinless purity. He has cancelled the record of our debt, the stain of our sinful past. It had demanded our punishment and eternal death, but God has set this aside, he has removed it, by nailing it to the cross in the body of his Son, Jesus. And thus, even the terrible*

*Satanic foes who mean us harm, they are disarmed in Christ. He has put them to shame, they run away red in the face, tails between their legs.*

*The preacher of this text, and this is a great text, will want to ask what might be the empty deceit of this generation. From my perspective in an academic setting it clearly looks like the students I receive have either utterly succumbed to the scientific materialism which rules in their biology class or they have answered this with an anti-intellectual Christian fundamentalism. But Paul is not saying we ought to eschew all philosophy and learning, but only that which is based upon the world's limited understanding. The fundamentalist says that there is no thinking to be done when God has revealed the truth. But God loves our minds and our bodies too. There is much thinking to do, and there is a healthy and salutary philosophy to be had. Both the materialist and the fundamentalist are really subscribing to a philosophy based upon the traditions of men.*

*But that is how things look to this teacher of young people. What do your congregants face? Where do they really put their hopes and their confidences? One could consider that this text is something of a first commandment text. The God who has revealed himself to us has revealed his love for us in the person and the work of Jesus. The world wants either something more dramatic or something it can control. The Greeks of Paul's day were scandalized at the very notion that a god would come in human form and take on flesh with all its frailty and even die. It was simply beneath God to do such a thing, at least from their human perspective. Many today end up in a similar place, but for very different reasons. God is up there, but the actual things of life are not connected to him, but to scientifically described processes. But as we noted above, science describes them, but does not explain them. For explanation, one really needs God.*

*What limits would we put on God lest he look too ungodlike in our estimation? What does our mind tell us, what does he say? Are we scandalized by the conversation He had with Abraham in Genesis 18? Should we be?*

*Who is judging us about new moons and ascetic practices today? My guess is that we are largely ignored on these accounts or perhaps counted as quaint if we should give something up at Lent. Even a weekly worship habit is simply a peculiar habit which no one expects to be passed along to the next generation. No one really cares, do they? How will we make this text work for our hearers?*

Luke 11:1-13

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."<sup>2</sup> And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

<sup>3</sup> Give us each day our daily bread,

<sup>4</sup> and forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.  
And lead us not into temptation.”

<sup>5</sup> And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves,’ <sup>6</sup> for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; <sup>7</sup> and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. <sup>9</sup> And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>10</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. <sup>11</sup> What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; <sup>12</sup> or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? <sup>13</sup> If 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!”

<sup>14</sup> Now he was casting out a demon that was mute.

*My opening essay on prayer really might be the best place to start here, but one could also run this through the lens of the readings we have just concluded in Luke. Two weeks ago Jesus was turning away some who could not prioritize him and his kingdom, even when they sought good things. Likewise last week we saw Mary and Martha contrasted – Martha was worried about many things. The proper relationship, the Mary-like relationship to which Jesus directs us begins with these simple little words addressed to God, “Our Father....”*

*What do you notice to be different in the prayer from Matthew’s version? The “Father” is simply stated, no “in heaven.” You might also be missing, “Thy will be done” and “deliver us from evil” at the end. I wonder why those lines are omitted. I honestly don’t know. The prayer is clearly the same prayer as Matthew presents, but it is very differently presented. Here is a side by side comparison:*

Matthew 6

<sup>9</sup> Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.

<sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread,

<sup>12</sup> and forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

Luke 11

“When you pray, say:

“Father, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.

<sup>3</sup> Give us each day our daily bread,

<sup>4</sup> and forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone who is

indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation.”

*How does one explain the differences? I first of all would not try to explain them. But if pressed, there are a couple of options. First of all, Jesus said none of this in Greek. Matthew and Luke, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are translating Jesus into Greek. That accounts for different phrasing, but not different content. Luke and Matthew may have had very different audiences who were already using Jesus’ prayer, but using different versions of it. Their recitation of the Lord’s Prayer may simply be the one that either author used. Clearly, the different versions serve the purposes of the author and the goals of the Spirit. Best that we just let the Spirit do what He wills in this sort of a situation. The same thing applies to the differences in the Beatitudes.*

*The paragraph which follows is very interesting and I think somewhat obscure for a modern audience. It speaks of the attitude of God to the prayer and the potency of prayer. God will answer prayers. He does not tune them out. A neighbor might get up and give you the loaf of bread because you are impudent and annoying in the middle of the night. God, on the other hand, hears them from the love of a father. That, “on the other hand” actually quite important, is assumed in the text. I would make sure that I got that into the sermon. God is not like the grumpy neighbor, he is very different than the grumpy neighbor, he wants to answer our prayers, more than that, he loves to answer our prayers. That is the point of this comparison. Likewise also the comparison the evil father, even an evil father knows how to give good things to his children. How much more should the one who prays to God be confident that God will give good things? God is not an evil father, but a good father.*

*So the Lord enjoins us to ask, seek, and knock. But if you preach this, make sure you hit that last line. We are not asking for a Ferrari or a bigger house. The gift given is far more precious and better even than life itself. The gift given is nothing less than the Holy Spirit!*

## **Law and Gospel**

1. God sometimes seems to be absent or distant from my life. My scientific side wants to prove him. My spiritual side wonders if he is even there. The first result is that I look to this world’s pathetic insight for the answers to my deepest questions. And then, wondering if God is even there, or if he cares, my prayer life withers and dries up. But God knows my frailty and weakness, he was after all a human just like me, and so he has poured out the Spirit upon me, and filled me with Christ himself.
2. That means that though the world has answers, I have a better answer, a better philosophy and knowledge. Flowing out of the truth of God, my baptism, and the revelation he has provided me, I can with confidence face death, suffering, and evil with answers. I don’t have them all, but I have an answer named Jesus who speaks to them all.

3. That also means that I have a relationship with the one who hears and answers prayers. In that relationship called faith, I know that he has time and interest to hear all my prayers, no matter how small, no matter what I have done. He is not the stumbling block here, I am. He knows this too. This is why I am filled with Christ, why I may call God “Father” because he knows how hard it is to pray and so he wants take every stumbling block out of the way.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. Lord, Teach us to Pray (That the hearer would be encouraged and equipped to pray regularly, fervently, and with joyful expectation of God’s answer.)

This is a sermon on prayer, you might take this in a number of ways but the best way to start this thing is with a story you can tell about when God answered a prayer. If the folks in the pews don’t hear you believing in prayer and backing that up with a story, this will be pretty shallow and not very effective. This really needs to be a story which you can tell authentically – don’t grab one from a sermon illustration book. If you cannot tell a story like that, you might not want to preach on prayer. If you can, however, tell it. A great story will be something that involves the congregation but can be very personal.

This story will do a couple of things. It will address the serious doubts that some people have that prayer actually is heard and that God answers prayers. The world is hammering on the idea that there is no one out there listening (materialism) and the only benefit to prayer is really something you could get from yoga or a few moments simply sitting quietly under a tree somewhere.

When Jesus teaches us to pray he stresses the relationship piece. This is tricky for us. We often want to make the relationship into something which we make. But you will preach about the relationship which God established in Baptism. You could build this on the pattern of Abraham and point out that God does not need this conversation, Abraham does, but clearly God likes it, wants it. Likewise Jesus urges us to seek, ask, and knock on the door of heaven. We have an open invitation from God. He really does like to hear from us. It is not some boring duty on his daily task list.

God will hear those prayers with a father’s heart. We might ask the people when was the last time they called their parents, or when was the last time the kids called you. What was that like? This could be a friend or some other loved one too. This sermon will suggest that prayer is rooted in this sort of a deep relationship. God wants to hear from us, indeed he promises that he will not tune us out because he has become attuned to our prayers. There were always three children I could not tune out of my sermons when they cried. The rest of the world’s kids could cry all they wanted, it never bothered me, but my own children just could not be tuned out. When Jesus invites us to pray, “Our Father…”

he is telling us that God hears us that way. Jesus compares our prayers to the requests of children to a dear father. God promises that he cannot tune us out either, because Christ dwells within us and that means we pray with the Son's voice. He has given us the right to say, "Our Father" when we pray. That is a beautiful honor bestowed upon a miserable and sinful creature.

Consider using Luther's words in the Small Catechism "With these words God invites us as dear children to call upon him as a dear father..."

In the end, this sermon should encourage parishioners to pray because God delights in their prayers, not because it is their duty. If they take this sermon to heart, believe what you say, they will pray with a joyful and eager expectation that God hears the prayer and he acts on prayer. Pray should move from the "duty list" to the "privilege list" or at least be moving in that direction when you are done with this sermon.

But all the talk about prayer is not the real message here. I really think they need to hear some examples of when prayers were heard and beautifully answered by God. They need to be inspired to pray and that best happens when we can ourselves point to a moment in time when the Lord answered my prayers. I cannot really tell another man's story effectively on this one. It almost has to be my story to have its fullest effect. The preacher of this sermon needs to think about how prayer has played a role in his life. If you cannot tell that story, if you don't have a story, I would really not preach this sermon.

This sermon could be really short and conclude with a very practical instruction on how to pray. If you want to use the ACTS prayer or another structure such as we presented above, put it into a handout in the bulletin, something they can take home and use during the week. And then tell them that the next Sunday you want to start the service with their stories of prayers answered. You are sure that there will be something.

Alternatively, if you are comfortable with this, you could start the sermon out by asking the congregants to share a story about a time when God answered their prayers. Not every parish is ready for that sort of an interactive sermon, but some are. That could open up then to a reading and explication of this text.

2. Walking in Christ's Victory (Colossians – that the hearer would walk confidently in the victory which Christ has won in death and resurrection.)

This sermon wants the hearer to be joyfully confident. In verse six of our reading Paul exhorts us to walk in Christ. In vss 14-15 he describes that walk as one of victory. Jesus has triumphed over our foes and we are given to live in that reality. The preacher will proclaim that truth. Jesus has died for our trespasses, nailed them to the cross. They are forgiven the final victory is assured. Our foes are now ridiculed, put to shame. They hold no power over us anymore, not real power. They are done.

- a. Victory over Satan's power and Sin and Death

- b. That victory empowers our walk. We walk in this new reality – Paul exhorts us to walk in faith, rooted in the Christ who lived, died, and rose again for us.
- c. This walk involves prayer – conversation with Jesus and the Father.

Helpful illustration – the super bowl champs or World Series champs parading down the streets of the city. They have won a title for a year and will have to defend it next season. They walk the streets or ride the convertible and the people shower them with confetti. Paul seems to be speaking of a particular sort of walk, a walk which is flowing out of the victory of Christ. Christ has won this victory eternally. Now we get to walk in the victory parade.

When the Royals won the championship last year and paraded down the streets of Kansas City, the whole organization went on that parade. The groundskeeper and the bat boys too. It was not just the superstars who made the great plays, but the whole organization got to go on that walk. The fans also get recognition in this. They often are praised by the owner of the winning team. They get to stand on that parade route and partake in that celebration too.

This victory gives us an “in” with the boss. Here might be the connection with prayer. Jesus exhorts us to pray to a Father – Jesus victory has given us the access to the father. This is the victory won for us. This is the walk to which Paul is directing us.

3. A growth that is from God (Colossians 2 - That the hearer would be rooted in the philosophy of Christ.)

This sermon speaks to the Christian’s fear that he or she is incompetent to the task of avoiding those hollow philosophies of which Paul speaks. Indeed one does not need to go very far before one sees folks who are judgmental and being judged on the basis of food they eat or holidays they observe or don’t observe. If you are struggling to understand what I mean, just strike up a serious religious conversation with an Adventist or a Jehovah’s Witness or a Vegan, or one of a host of other movements and denominations which have spawned in North America since the country’s founding. We have a very human predilection to find security in rules which define us. When Christ won’t give us the ones we like, we will make some up. If you want to get a chuckle about this, consider the Ultra-Spiritual Youtube channel – here is his guide on how to be ultra spiritual: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kDso5E1FRg>

Some find the whole philosophy thing just too much for them. They take comfort in a sort of mindless Christianity. I am not suggesting that they have no faith, far from it. But their faith is vulnerable in another way. It might seem more faithful to shut off the brain when it comes to matters of God, but it is also very risky and indeed refusing one of God’s great gifts. History and our own experience is littered with the empty wallets,

broken hearts, and shattered dreams of folks who mindlessly believe and have been taken in, cheated, and abused by unscrupulous types who understand the power of religion.

Such an approach to religion forgets that the mind is a potent thing and the rebellious mind is capable of great evil. So God is here to help us. Paul warns the Colossians but he starts them out in the right place. They are rooted and grounded and being built in their baptism and the solid teaching of the incarnation they have already confessed. The Creed makes a very good basic litmus test for new ideas. That is good grounding. The Catechism takes that a step further, explaining and helping us sort out the wackiness from the truth.

But best of all, this sermon proclaims the ongoing presence of Christ and His Spirit. Joined to Christ who is the head, we are the body which derives direction and life itself from Him. Connected to Jesus by the Spirit, we remember that he is also called the counselor. We are reminded of that needful thing which Mary saw and to which Jesus pointed Martha last week. Jesus in the flesh: Satan cannot abide with this and his work is always to deny either the deity of the man or the humanity of the Incarnate. He knows that when they come together, his kingdom is undone. And so the Spirit keeps us in that place.

This sermon addresses a powerful fear which people have. They don't know how to navigate all this stuff. You have the joy of proclaiming a promise and a hope to them. We are not alone in this endeavor. God loves our minds, he loves our whole person and he means it when he promises to take care of them. Paul, as His servant, is doing just that for the Colossians and for us.

4. Hallowed be Thy Name – Thy Kingdom Come – Thy Will Be Done (That the hearer would mindfully pray the Lord's Prayer)

This sermon is designed for the hearer and parish which is simply going through the motions of Christianity without engaging their minds. There are a couple of problematic reactions to such mindless worship and we need to dispense with them right away. Some would force the issue, creating a new worship service every week and thereby force the mindful participation of the congregant. It does that, but soon degenerates into the narrow confines of the worship planner's personal piety and experience. Participating in a liturgical tradition serves a number of purposes, not the least of which is that it brings far more to that service than any human being or worship committee ever could. Chucking the liturgy out the window because it has become rote is not the answer.

The other problematic response is from some on the other end of the spectrum. Here one finds those who slavishly adhere to a ritual they do not understand and do not think it is important to understand. It is simply good enough to do it, even if the words were gibberish to us or so familiar that we can enter the service and effectively shut down our

minds and go on autopilot. This is less a problem with the recent proliferation of services and hymnals. But it can still arise in certain quarters.

Both of these are a problem, but the solution is found somewhere between them. There is a benefit to singing the Agnus Dei every Sunday. I have had some of the most wonderful worship experiences when I did not need to think about the words but could let them wash over me. At the same time, those wonderful experiences were also made better by thinking about them.

This week we want to pray the Lord's Prayer mindfully. Not because that makes the Lord's Prayer a better prayer, but because it allows the whole person to engage in it and that is a very good thing. What is more, the content of the Lord's Prayer is the exact opposite of the world's hollow philosophy mentioned in the Epistle lesson. In a sense, this is a catechetical sermon. You would do well to pull out Dr. Luther's catechisms, both the large (read it online here: <http://bocl.org?LC+III>) and the small. Luther has some excellent things to say about these petitions:

- a. We pray as dear children to a dear father. This places the whole prayer into a beautiful and loving relationship. We are not just insignificant motes of dust addressing the great architect of the universe. He hears us with a father's ear.
- b. The name, will, and kingdom of God exist outside of us and are holy and pure without our works or prayers. We are really praying that these things happen among us. The real issue is how God's name is holy among us, in our words, in our deeds, and in our lives. This transition in Luther is profound. The prayers are now for God to act in our lives.
- c. The holiness of God's name and accomplishment of God's will have everything to do with how we conduct ourselves as a congregation and as individuals. The kingdom of God comes when the plans of the devil are thwarted, the sick healed, the hungry fed, the lonely befriended. These are all God's kingdom breaking into this world which otherwise lies under Satan's power.
- d. God's name is holy when we live a life of love and purity but also when we preach, teach, and pass along the Gospel to those who are near us. The Lord's Prayer speaks directly to your parish' VBS and Sunday School programs, to the sort of worship we engage in and the way we conduct our ministry. This is what we are praying for here.
- e. More? Let's talk about this on Tuesday.

The sermon will need to circle back to Luther's introduction to the prayer, embedding all this material in that framework. As he said in the Large Catechism:

Therefore you should say: My prayer is as precious, holy, and pleasing to God as that of St. Paul or of the most holy saints. This is the reason: For I will gladly grant that he is holier in his person, but not on account of the commandment; since God does not regard prayer on account of the person, but on account of His word and obedience thereto. For on the commandment on which all the saints rest their prayer I, too, rest mine. Moreover, I pray for the same thing for which they all pray and ever have prayed; besides, I have just as great a need of it as those great saints, yea, even a greater one than they. Large Catechism on the Lord's Prayer, 16 you can find it here: <http://bocl.org?LC+III+16>