

“Prayer Power” – Luke 11:1-13 – July 25/04

“Lord, teach us to pray” - what a dangerous can of worms that is to open, isn't it?! What if He did? What would happen if we really learned how to ask for what we want? What would we do if we could learn to pray so effectively that we actually got what we asked for in prayer? What would happen if we asked for something hugely different in our lives, asked for a complete change in the path of our life? That just isn't done, is it? Or is it? Wouldn't that mean that somehow we could get God to change his mind? That, to some people, just doesn't happen! Some claim that God is “immutable”, completely unchanging and unchangeable, the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Well, I would agree that the essence of God, the goodness of God, is unchanging, but I do firmly believe that not only does God change His mind about things, and we have evidence in scripture that He does change His mind and intentions. I had an interesting experience over this very issue not too long ago while I was guest preaching. The regular pianist was away, and there was a substitute from the Baptist congregation across the street. At the end of the service this dear lady cornered me – she was pretty intense - and she started to pick on me about “Presbyterians in general and I as a Presbyterian in particular didn't seem to believe in God's perfect plan”. I asked her if she believed that everything that happened was part of this perfect plan, and she replied that certainly she did. I then asked her, “So why do you pray for God's interceding?” She went from going, “well, well, ...” to being completely confused as I pointed out that if everything that happened was “according to plan”, then there was no point in praying. That if there was an unchanging ‘perfect plan’ then we are all just actors on some divine and cosmic videotape, and what we did or didn't do didn't matter, since we had no choice or chance to change. Moreover, if that truly is the case, then the only prayers that makes sense are, “Lord, thank you.”, or more likely, “Lord, make me accept it”. Unless our prayers can move God to intervene in the events of life, and cause things to change, to happen differently, there is no point in praying.

Thank God, we have clear scriptural evidence that there is a point to praying. While it is abundantly clear from today's O.T. text how bad things were in Israel in Hosea's time, and just how frustrated with His people and how angry God was at them, it is also clear from the rest of the message Hosea was called to carry that God was willing to back off, to relent, to accept His sinning people if only they would return to him in worship and in prayer.

Not that this is the only place where we have evidence of God's “mutability”, or ability to change his mind and intentions. Throughout the prophetic literature we have numerous examples of God “relenting”, (actually ‘repenting’ in many places) and taking back promises of turmoil and utter destruction. Not that God didn't keep such promises ... the near-total wipeout of the northern kingdom in the Assyrian sweep of 722 B.C. is one prime example, but time and time again as people heard God's message, repented of their ways and called upon him, he also changed in response. The psalms also show us many examples of God's relenting, and changing.

More than that, however, is the example of Jesus. Jesus prayed. Jesus prayed until he sweated blood. Jesus prayed often, and in many circumstances. And if Jesus, who was one with the Father, felt the need and the value of prayer, are we not even more called to follow his actions, and pray ourselves? And if you are inclined to think that praying was important for Jesus, kind of an early form of his keeping touch via the wireless office, but that praying isn't so important for us, then I urge you to reread the passage in Luke that we just read. Jesus' teachings to his disciples about prayer was anything but the equivalent of today's ‘what-ever’; instead Jesus not only affirmed the need and value of them (and us) praying, but taught them (and us) the what, the when, the how and the why to pray.

The ‘how’ is in the prototype, in what we call the “Lord's Prayer”, whether in the full version we like to use, or in the abbreviated version here in Luke. When all else fails us, when we don't know

where to turn, or what to do or say, these words will often come to our lips, and what could be more appropriate in times of such crisis? When times are good, and we come together in the company of friends, neighbours, and even strangers in the faith, we derive an intense sense of communion from praying these familiar words together. Indeed, the Lord's Prayer has been an essential component of worship in the Reformed church since the days of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Knox. In all times of our lives this prototype prayer from the lips of Jesus is a foundation upon which we can build all our other prayers. (I would, however, argue for a slight change – I'd like us to switch in worship from using 'debts' to using 'sins' just as it appears here in Luke's gospel – but if you think changing God's mind is tough, try changing a congregations' mind about something like this! I suspect that prayer will be the only way!)

There is also a clue as to the 'when' in the Lord's Prayer. The reference to 'daily bread', when coupled with Jesus' words that we do not live by bread alone, reminds us that 'daily' is an appropriate 'when' for prayer. We have moved a bit away from Calvin's regulated daily time or times, but still some regular basis between the extremes of five times per day of Islam and the Christmas and Easter observances of many would be good, and at least once a day seems very appropriate to give thanks to God for another day, and to make requests to have life unfold in ways that are pleasant.

The 'why' is also addressed in this passage from Luke. Assurances that seeking results in finding; asking results in receiving; knocking on the door causes it to be opened to us. Further assurances that this is not some mechanical lining up at God's warehouse to put our order in for the toys, trinkets and well-being that we want, but an assurance that each request will be carefully heard, and be responded to with infinite love. We won't always get what we want, or what we are convinced we need, but we can be reassured that the answer to our prayers will not be spiteful, capricious, or against our own good. Just as loving parents respond to requests from their children, so too does God respond to our request. (And just as sometimes when you're a child the response from the parents doesn't seem to make sense or to be kind, in retrospect we often see that the response we got, although not being what we wanted, was indeed what we needed and would have been what we would have asked for if we had been smarter!)

Finally, the parable about rousting your friend in the night gives us a clue about the 'how' of praying. "Because of his persistence, he will get up and give him what he needs", Jesus concludes. Persistence, even boldness, is not only okay but also called for. For me, at least, the bottom line here is, "pray boldly, confident in the power of prayer."

Now it's tough to be bold with an authority figure we don't know, isn't it? Oh sure, especially when we were younger we addressed our fears by trying to appear fearless, being "sassy bold" with teachers, police, and other people in authority over us. I'm not talking about that kind of bold here, but instead the boldness that is being forthright, grounded in a calm assurance that it's not only okay but expected to be open and "straight up". The only way to achieve that kind of comfort and assurance is through familiarity, through establishing a familiar and ongoing relationship with God in prayer. It's not necessary ... God is quite willing to hear and responds powerfully to the halting and stumbling first-time prayer, "Lord, save me from my sins, cleanse and accept me" no matter how awkwardly phrased it may be, and with what fear and trembling it is delivered. But faith works best when exercised, just like muscles and well-oiled machinery. Like jogging, or the Grouse Grind, it gets easier with repetition. With sufficient practice, we can even be as comfortable talking to God as children are. I saw a couple of cute quotations go by in my email in the past ... one from a Joyce was, "Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy." Another, attributed to Elliot, goes, "Dear God, I think about you sometimes even when I'm not praying." We can have that kind of comfortable relationship with God – the only hindrance is ourselves.

Many people have a problem with being bold in prayer. I don't know if it's because we're trying to be polite, or whether our perspective is like that of the clergyman in the Monty Python movie, "The Meaning of Life", where he goes on about "God, you are so awfully, awfully huge, and we are so insignificant", but too often we kind of self-effacingly murmur our prayers as if we're afraid to bother God. One of my pet peeves is the overabundant use of the word "just" in prayers ... "O Lord, we just ask ...", as if we're trying to sneak a "teensy" request through if it's not too much trouble. Jesus is telling his disciples in this text, and us, that he is encouraging us to pray with the deliberate intention and expectation of having our requests heard, and answered. He is telling us with the parable of the woken-up friend to bother God, to be persistent, to ask with clarity and passion for what it is we want or need. We don't want to be brash, or arrogant and demanding, and we don't have to be. (Besides, God will know how to take care of us if we get "out of hand".) However, I firmly believe that we are called to pray with the power of conviction that prayer works – that God does listen, does consider our request, does respond to our prayer by acting in our best interest. Be bold – pray with conviction and faith!

Finally, about content, or what to pray for. General prayers are good, such as prayers for world peace, but isn't there a danger in hiding behind such generalities? Yes, if all of us were to pray for world peace it might very well happen. But it really doesn't touch us directly, does it? A more powerful prayer in many ways would be, "show me what I can do to help bring about world peace, and give me the courage to do it". That's scary, isn't it? Now it's specific, and personal, and could be dramatically life-changing for me, if not for the world. Instead of "make the world a more Christian place to live", the prayer "change me so I can proclaim your love to those who need it, and then help me to do so" is way more specific, frightening, and perhaps productive. Get down to the nitty-gritty, the "daily bread".

So, there we are. Who would have believed that we have such power? Well, Jesus, for one. And his disciples, who learned from him how to pray. They believed in the power of prayer. And the people of faith down through the past two thousand years, they believed in the power of prayer. Now it's our turn to hear, to learn, to exercise that power of prayer.