

Psalm 138 ~ Luke 11:1-13

**Going With God: A Three Sermon Series**

**Part 2: How Then Shall We Pray?**

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ Baptism ~ Father's Day

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***Introduction to Text***

Last week our scriptures told us to: Love your neighbor like the Samaritan did for the man who fell among the robbers. Love God like Mary was doing, sitting and listening at the feet of Jesus. OK—but how? How can we engage in daring acts of compassion like the Samaritan did? How can we figure out what is the better part, like Mary did? How can get going and keep “Going with God” through all the ups and downs, all the turbulence and transitions that our lives really hold?

The answer that Luke gives us can be summed up in one word: Pray. Really pray, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. That’s what Jesus did. Easy for God’s son, but what about us? How can we do that? It’s hard for us. We don’t really know how. Lucky for us, one day a disciple saw Jesus playing in a certain place, and was moved to seize the moment and just ask him, “How do you do that? Teach us, Jesus.”

So now let’s listen to God’s Holy Word as it is written in Luke, where Jesus responds to this request with an impromptu lesson on prayer. You might call it “Prayer for Dummies.” As I read this scripture out loud, listen for its three parts: a prayer, a parable, and a promise.

***Sermon***

*Dear God,*

*Thank you for my baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.*

*Signed, Joyce*

This is a prayer from the little book you may have seen titled, *Children’s Letters to God*.<sup>i</sup>

Here are a few more:

*Dear Mr. God,*

*I wish you would not make it so easy for people to come apart. I had 3 stiches and a shot.*

Janet

*Dear God*

*I wish that there wasn’t no such thing of sin. I wish that there was not no such thing of war.*

Tim

*Dear God*

*Maybe Cain and Able would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother.*

Larry

Dear God,

*I want to be just like my Daddy when I get big—but not with so much hair all over.*

Sam

Dear God,

*I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday.*

*That was cool.*

Eugene

Did you ever notice how children seem to pray more easily than grownups? Children are able to ask big questions, to register complaint and disappointment, to thank God, even to present solutions to God. Children don't worry if they are doing it right, or what God will think. Here's the surprising truth: we can learn a lot about prayer from children. If we take a good look at Jesus' teaching on prayer, it appears he thinks so too. At the beginning and at the end of our scripture lesson on prayer Jesus places us in the role of child. Let me explain.

The biggest shocker in this passage comes in the first word of the prayer. Rabbi Jesus instructs his disciples to begin with the word, "Father." Jesus is telling them to address God Almighty, the Creator of the Universe as "Father." For his disciples, the idea of father as a metaphor for God was not new—we find it throughout the Hebrew scriptures, as in Psalm 103:13, "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him." We also find metaphoric mother language for God several places in the Old Testament. One example is Isaiah 66:13 where it is written, "As a mother comforts her children, so I will comfort you." Here's my point: it wasn't the parental image of God that would have shocked his disciples—It was the instruction to speak to God, to pray to God in such a personal, intimate way that would have rocked them to their core.

You may recall that faithful Jews in Jesus' time did not even utter the divine name "Yahweh" out loud. This was how they had been taught to honor God's holiness, God's mystical otherness. And then Jesus tells them to pray to God by addressing God as, "Father?" That was as shocking as Jesus holding up a despised Samaritan as a model of loving neighbor, or as holding up Mary's decision to assume the traditional posture of a male disciple at the feet of Jesus rather than in the kitchen—as the better part. In today's passage, Jesus is clearly instructing his Jewish disciples to address God as "Father" when praying. Jesus prays to God with the word "Abba" when he is in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing his crucifixion. "Abba" was the probably one of the first words Jesus ever spoke, it is commonly understood as Aramaic for "Dada."

What does this mean for us? In this one word, Jesus is inviting us into an intimate relationship with God. As Richard Foster wrote in his book titled, *Prayer*, “We are encouraged to crawl into the Father’s lap and receive his love and comfort and healing and strength. We can laugh, and we can weep, freely and openly. We can be hugged and find comfort in his arms. And we can worship deep within our spirit.”<sup>ii</sup> Regardless of what kind of human father you were born to, the Divine Father provides safety, security, healing and strength for all of us.

Here’s the surprising turn: it is from this posture of childlike security, that we can find the courage to be changed. This is what prayer can do. It can shift our perspective and open up a new way of seeing ourselves and the world. Prayer decenters us. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promises in v. 13, “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!”

Did you know that the Latin word for anxiety “angustia” literally means “narrowness?” When was the last time you asked God simply for the Holy Spirit to widen your lens? Or when was the last time you asked Christ to soften some hardness of your heart that you have been harboring maybe for a very long time toward a person, or a group of people? The gift of the Holy Spirit can widen our perspective and help us access compassion we could not find otherwise.

It begins with addressing God as Father, Parent, Dada, Mama. And then what happens? Here is what happens according to Henri Nouwen, Catholic Priest and renowned author of spiritual books, as well as a formative spiritual mentor since I was an undergraduate in college. When you hear this, I think you will see why. This is originally from his *Genesee Diary*:

“When I really bring my friends and the many I pray for into my innermost being and feel their pains, their struggles, their cries in my own soul, then I leave myself, so to speak, and become them, then I have compassion. Compassion lies at the heart of our prayer for our fellow human beings. When I pray for the world, I become the world; when I pray for the endless needs of the millions, my soul expands and wants to embrace them all and bring them into the presence of God. But in the midst of that experience I realize that compassion is not mine but God’s gift to me.”<sup>iii</sup>

How can we possibly embrace the complexity of nuclear disarmament on the Korean Peninsula; or the seeming impossibility of a just peace in the Middle East? How can we embrace the plight of refugee families fleeing from certain death at home to the possibility of a better life anywhere else? How can we hope for true healing for all the victims and the victimizers being brought to light through the #MeToo Movement?” How can we expand our vision from self to other, in order to be the Samaritan, and obey the commandment to “Love our neighbor (regardless of where they are from) as ourselves”?

If we prayed with all our hearts just the first verse of Jesus' model prayer: "**Father, hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come,**" – God could free us to leave ourselves, and make that world-changing shift, from self to God, from self to others. Perhaps you are thinking that sounds great, but I don't think *that I could ever pray* that way. Let's be realistic here. Jesus was all about the real and reachable. Let's remember: Jesus actually was us, at one point in time.

I will close with "en-couraging" advice from a dear friend of Bob's and mine. Yes: advice *that gives courage* to the faint of heart. This friend named Kent, and Bob washed dishes together as undergraduates in college and between the dishes became life long friends. It was only because of his encouraging advice that Bob and I began to do cross-country bicycle touring—an activity that became a major part of our lives and our children's lives from that point forward. Kent had just completed a solo bicycle ride across the country, coast to coast. And instead of bragging or making it seem impossible, he kept telling us: "You two can totally do it. You don't need fancy bikes, your bikes are good enough. You don't need to be elite athletes. You are ready right now. Sure, you can ride your bikes 60-80 miles a day over the Rocky Mountains. All you have to do is get on the bike and keep pedaling."

And so to all of us I say today: You can do it. You can pray with all your heart, to change and open your mind and strengthen your soul. This is something you are ready to do right now. Just get on the bike and keep pedaling. In other words: just open your heart and keep praying, keep asking, seeking, knocking. And see what God can do.

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<sup>i</sup> *Children's Letter to God*, compiled by Stuart Hample & Eric Marshall, illustrated by Tom Bloom, (Workman Publishing, New York, NY, 1991).

<sup>ii</sup> *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, by Richard J. Foster, (Harper Collins: New York, NY 1992), p.135.

<sup>iii</sup> *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, edited by Robert Durback, (Image Doubleday, New York: NY, Second Edition, 1997), p. 124.