

Learning to Pray: Who Are We Talking To?
Luke 11:1-13

Dr. Don Flowers, Jr.
Port Williams United Baptist Church

I normally don't sit here. Most of the time when we come to the sermon part of the service I am behind the pulpit, wearing a robe. Rightly or wrongly that is often viewed that I, or whoever the preacher might be, has some divine inerrant word from God.

Not today.

This is really more of a conversation. A bit one-sided I know, but one that I hope you will join me in. For the next few weeks I want us to have a conversation about prayer.

These sermons came about after listening to a podcast Kate Bowler did with Father James Martin.¹ He has written a wonderful book, *Learning to Pray*, that I highly recommend.

But if I am honest the germ of these sermons goes much deeper. Prayer is one of those subjects that has long fascinated me, confused me, drawn me.

How about you?

It is one of those lines that we hear so often it has almost become a throw away line. We heard it again this past week by government officials in the US after another mass shooting, after another death in Nova Scotia from Covid. *"Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims and their families."* We've heard it so often. Thoughts and prayers.

It is a line that we say so often. *"I will be praying for you."* *"You'll be in my prayers."* But really? Do we?

What does it mean to pray?

How do you pray?

Does it do any good?

My honest answer is I don't know. Perhaps not something you want or expect to hear from a pastor, but it is true. I don't know how prayer work. There are times when I don't know how to pray.

I know people who I believe God listens to more than God listens to me. There have been times when our children have called to say "ask the church ladies to pray!" I know people who, when they pray I am just moved, I can feel the intimacy they have with God. On my computer is a file of prayers from other people, individuals when after they have offered a prayer in a worship service I have asked for a copy of their words.

Prayer is a mystery to me, I don't know how it works, but I know that it does. I know that when Ada was stillborn I didn't think I would be able to walk, to be upright. All I know

¹ <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/father-james-martin-what-good-is-prayer/>

is that it was the prayers of friends, of this congregation that kept me going. I don't know how it worked, but I know it did.

There are other prayers that I just don't understand. Offertory prayers for instance, those prayers we offer when take up a collection. What exactly are we praying for? Are we praying that perhaps God would treat it like the little boy's lunch, transforming the loonie we place in the offering place into a \$100 bill? Or are we asking God to make us, or those around us more generous? If so, then wouldn't it be more honest to pray, "*God, bless those who give with abundance, but those who don't O God strike them blind!*" Just one person going blind would take care of the church's budget!

Oh, but we can't say that! We aren't supposed to think that, to ask those questions! Even if the thought runs through our mind we aren't supposed to say it out loud. We are just suppose to know these things, right?

Somewhere along the way we have picked up the idea that when we come dripping out of the baptismal waters we suddenly know how to pray!

Oh, if it was only that simple!

But prayer is not something that just happens anymore than reading or math or growing apples or brain surgery. We have to learn. All of us.

Even the disciples. Did you hear it?

Apparently Jesus had been praying, in a certain place. We don't know where. It wasn't the first time that Luke tells us that Jesus had been praying around the disciples. He had been praying when he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"² He had been praying on the Mount of Transfiguration when his very countenance changed.³

The disciples had seen Jesus praying. They had heard him praying. But on this day something stirred in their being and one of them asked him, "*Lord teach us to pray as John taught his disciples to pray.*"⁴

What was the prayer John taught to his disciples.

⁵Apparently there was one, and apparently the disciples of Jesus had heard it. I'm not sure how it happened but in one of my more playful moments last week I imagined the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus sitting down together for a meal. Jesus' disciples, of course, would have failed to wash their hands, as always, and as soon as the food was on the table they would start piling it onto their plates. That's when one of John's disciples would clear his throat and say, "*Excuse me, but we haven't said the prayer yet.*" "*Prayer?*" Jesus' disciples would wonder. "What prayer?" And then the disciples of John would bow their heads, fold their hands, and say, in unison:

² Luke 9:18

³ Luke 9:29

⁴ Luke 11:1

⁵ This section of the sermon was "borrowed" from my friend Jim Somerville from a sermon he preached at First Baptist Church, Washington DC, on July 29, 2007. It is borrowed with permission!

*God is great, God is good,
Let us thank him for our food.
By his hands we all are fed,
Give us, Lord, our daily bread.*

OK, it probably wasn't *that* prayer, but whatever it was it was a prayer that John had taught to his disciples, one that they had learned by heart, one that they prayed together on occasion. It was like a secret handshake: something that sets you apart from those on the outside. The disciples of Jesus may have been a little jealous. "*How come they get a prayer? Why don't we have one?*" And so, when the opportunity came up, one of the disciples made a request:

"Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

And in a reply that sounds as if it Jesus was just making it up off the top of his head said, "When you pray say:

*Father,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.*

We know that prayer. We said it together this morning as a part of our morning prayer. We know we are supposed to pray, but what is it? What is prayer?

The word comes from the Latin verb *precarious* which means to beg or entreat.⁶ And many times that is how we view prayer. We beg God to do something for us or someone else.

But that really misses the point! God is not an aloof being who wants us to beg! We may have gotten that from Luke's example of the person coming in the middle of the night asking for bread since an unexpected guest has arrived. We get the sense that we have to keep hounding God, beating God down until we finally get what we are asking for!

Is that the reason we don't pray? Do we just have a wrong image of God? Who is the God you pray to? May I suggest that that too often we just have a wrong picture of God! Our reading of this text helps give us that idea. We quit the passage way too soon! We have to read a bit further. Jesus asks, "If your child asks for a fish would you give him a snake? Or if your child asks for an egg will you give her a scorpion?" Of course not! We would never do that!

So then Jesus teaches us perhaps one of his most important theological lessons, one that we so often miss. He says, "Then if you would not do that, and you are anything but perfect love, why do you think that God who is perfect love would not do so much more?"

⁶ *Companions in Christ Participant's Book*. (Upper Room Press:Nashville, 2001) 113.

God is so much more loving than we ever could be. God is not looking to shortchange us, to zap us, to make us grovel. God is always looking for ways to bless our lives. If we would change our way of seeing God, might we be more willing to pray?

James Martin defines prayer as “*conscious conversation with God.*”⁷ We are not relating to this any far off abstract being that doesn’t care about the world or us. We are relating to a God who cares intensely about us, who wants a relationship with us, who wants to know what is going on.

Is there a person whom you love more than life itself? How do you feel when you have a conversation, when you share time together? That is how God feels about us when we pray—only more so!

Martin sums up his definition of what prayer is saying “*It is a raising up of our minds and hearts; a surge of the heart; a sharing between friends; a long, loving look at the real; and a conscious conversation, all of which happens in the context of a personal relationship with God.*”

That is his definition. What is yours? I invite you to give it some thought this week. I invite you to pray this week. Maybe the Lord’s Prayer, just pray. Just say, “God.....” And wait.....and listen.

The experience, the relationship is more important than our definition. Even more important and life giving is just the practice, just praying.

Amen

⁷ James Martin. *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone*. Kindle Edition. <https://a.co/5HTS8PC>