

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

HOW TO PRAY

Luke 11:1-13

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Ron Starenko

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.

3 Give us each day our daily bread.

4 And 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 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 for 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 with the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

DIAGNOSIS: The Human Impossibility

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *We Do Not Know How to Pray*

In today's lesson, excepting Jesus, of course, nobody seems to know how to pray. Jesus' and John's disciples grew up in the synagogues, learned the Psalms, and knew how to use prayer shawls. Even the great apostle, Paul, at one time a Pharisee, who later became a follower of Jesus, knew all the prayers as well, and still he wrote, "we do not know how to pray as we ought" (Rom. 8:26). Are these men of prayer admitting that prayer is a human impossibility? It certainly seems that way. Despite all of our religiosity, we live in a culture where even prayer most often is a form of blasphemy. The media, politicians, even the average citizen, buys into the piety of offering "our thoughts and prayers" over victims of one kind or another. Despite the sympathy behind it all, no one expects that great things will happen, as we laugh, even scoff, at the absurdity that "someone up there" is listening, let alone changing anything. How can prayer alter the drift of all nations toward conflict and war? The misery of the world is so overwhelming, the crisis so deep, we have long given up on the notion that "prayer changes things."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Superstitious*

and Presumptuous Nonetheless

That doesn't seem to stop us, however, from believing in fairy tales. We certainly haven't given up on "knocking on wood" (v. 5), expecting some lucky turn of events, that some deity will smile on us. We will not acknowledge "our weakness" (Rom. 8:16), concluding that the real problem is that there really isn't anyone "out there" who will come to our rescue, that we will have to depend on ourselves and make the best of it in life. We will never stoop to knock on someone else's door (v. 7), as we believe in the survival of the fittest. Prayer, many believe, is a sign of weakness, the hope of those who do not know to take care of themselves. We hold to what is humanly possible, nothing more, nothing less. Those who "persist" (v. 8), grasping every opportunity to get ahead, will succeed. That is the human creed, the American dream, "the hopes and prayers" of us all.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Finally Hitting a Wall

Eventually, however, we all run out of options, no more doors to open, when finally a door closes against us, the "bread" of our earthly goods failing us, ending up with debts we cannot pay, deadly powers we cannot escape. At last, without a prayer, we are double-crossed by the gods we trusted in, having made friends with the powers who "cannot get up and give us anything" (v. 7). What is even worse, having gods who fail us, tied to what is human or less, we meet the living God who comes knocking and we are the ones found wanting, the tragic reversal (v. 7), as we have exhausted all possibilities, stopped dead in our tracks. The kingdom of God came, even without our prayer, as Luther was bold to assert, and we missed it, the door slammed shut in our faces.

PROGNOSIS: The Divine Possibility

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Having Someone

Who Knows How to Pray

As bad as that is, the good news is that even though we do not know how to pray, cannot pray, God will do in Jesus what we cannot do, making prayer and communion with the Divine truly possible. Indeed, Jesus' life itself was a prayer, as he was at all times in communion with his Father, when he was alone in the desert tempted by the evil one, when he was at meals with his friends, when he was doing miracles of healing, when he was in agony in the garden of Gethsemane and in the upper room awaiting his suffering on the cross. Even in his final moments, he never broke with his Father, praying, as if to say, "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope" (Psalm 130:5). "In the days of his flesh," writes the author of Hebrews, "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Heb. 5:7), raised from the dead he was, becoming "the source of salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:9). What is more, he, along with the Father, has given us the Holy Spirit (v. 13), who intercedes for all the saints, who bears witness in our weakness that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:26-27). The Holy Spirit, who is everything, present at creation, in the ministry of the prophets, in the conception of Jesus, in the resurrection of Jesus, the Spirit who creates the church, forgiving sins and finally raising the dead, is "the Lord and Giver of life," who makes our praying possible, along with everything else that is good (v. 13).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *We Become His Prayer*

As a result, by the goodness of God toward sinners, weak as we are, we have received the power to participate in the impossible. We get to be with the company of the faithful, where Jesus, our Lord and Brother, is present, praying with us in the

“Our Father.” He is the prayer, both the intercessor and the answer, offered among us, the here-and-now kingdom of God’s gracious rule, the bread, whether daily or sacramental, the gift of forgiveness undeserved, our defense in every trial and test. We have the word and promise of God, the gift of the Spirit, who holds us and whom we hold, trusting that even in our weakness when we don’t know how to pray or what to pray for, we are God’s children nevertheless. A divine mystery, yes! Possible, yes! We know that “whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything, (and so) we have boldness before God” (1 John 3:20-21). Having received the Holy Spirit, we already have what we pray for in the presence and power of Jesus, while we wait in prayer for “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,” the promised “much more” (v. 13).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Opening Doors*

While we pray and knock and wait, holding on to the bread of eternity in the company of Jesus, we remain a community that reaches out to and welcomes all those in their weakness who are tempted to give up knocking and begging and searching, announcing that they, too, will be received into the divine possibility, into God’s forgiving presence, where doors are opened, gifts are shared, hopes are kept alive, and prayers, whether in this life or in the world to come, are finally answered. How could we miss out on getting all the goodies, since knowing how to pray finally has to do with his prayer, the “Our Father,” which he both prays with us and for us, which is why we are able to hang in there, against all odds.