

Year C Proper 17 Luke 11 1 to 13

Last Sunday, when we explored the story of Martha and Mary, we learned that an integral piece to being a follower of Christ, being a Christian, is being in relationship – with God, with each other, and with the world. God’s goal is for perfect relationship – with and among humanity and the rest of creation – bringing the perfection of his kingdom to those who choose to live in it. This is hard work, though, we discovered. Martha had been distracted by the pull of all of the world’s busyness and brokenness. It is so easy to slip into the world’s way of thinking – the way of empire in which “might makes right”, where power depends on how much you have...how much property, prestige, and how big your pocketbook is. The world’s kingdoms and God’s kingdom coexist and the empires of the world, if you don’t look at them too closely, can seem so much more attractive than God’s kingdom. According to empire, the perfection that brings happiness is having what we want...the more you have, the more “successful” you are said to be. Success and the happiness that supposedly comes along with that success, totally revolves around money. If you’re driving a Porsche, you must be more successful than the guy driving the Chevy Malibu. If your family is decked out in designer clothing, your family must be more successful than the family who shops at Value Village. We have it drilled into us that the “good life” takes money and all of the stuff that money buys.

In contrast, in God’s kingdom the “good life” revolves around love and compassion, sharing what we have so that everyone has enough instead of one class having more than enough while others beg on the streets to survive. Happiness in God’s kingdom – as I read on the Zion Lutheran sign not too long ago – happiness is an inside job. And it’s more than simply being happy. Life in God’s

kingdom is a life of deep joy and hope in spite of the imperfections still existing in us and around us. It is the joy and hope known through being in relationship with God.

As with any friendship, marriage, or even business partnership, having a good relationship revolves around having good communication – open and honest communication that builds up. To be in relationship with God is no different. Our communication with God comes mostly through prayer. Jesus tells us today that the way in which we see our relationship with God is very important in our communication with God through prayer.

Today, Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them how to pray and he responds in three parts. He provides a model prayer, a parable about prayer, and then some sayings about prayer. "Jesus invites his disciples into a deeply personal relationship with God, encouraging them to call upon God using the same name he uses — Abba, Father. He invites his disciples to call upon God as children call upon a loving parent, trusting that they belong to God and that God wants for them what is good and life giving" (Elizabeth Johnson, Workingpreacher.org). If imperfect human parents know how to give their children gifts that are good for them, then how much more will the heavenly Father give good gifts to his children who ask of him, including and especially the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In our age of political correctness, there are people who take exception to calling God, "Father." Perhaps this encourages the male dominance of society. Without getting too deeply into this issue, Jesus knew God as "Father" but he did not place God into a male "box" and leave him there. Jesus uses motherly imagery to describe God as well – the mother hen sheltering her chicks for instance. God

defies all labels – God is simply God. But, we can know God as Father as Jesus did because this helps our human minds understand an incomprehensible being whom we actually do not know how to describe. This brings us to another issue. There are people who have had horrible experiences with their human fathers. This is not a new issue. There have been good and loving fathers along with uncaring, abusive fathers for as long as there have been fathers. In the Greco-Roman period in which Jesus lived and taught, the father of the household had absolute control. When a baby was born, the father decided whether to keep the child, sell the child into slavery, or simply kill the child. This is actually the point Jesus is trying to make: In contrast to the imperfections of human parents, God can be nothing but good, nothing but loving.

In using a relationship that is familiar to us – even when this relationship is in a realm of perfection we can only aspire to – Jesus is helping us to understand that we can approach God, we can ask for what we need, we can be in relationship with God. When a friend arrives unexpectedly at midnight and the host realizes he does not have enough bread to feed him, the host goes knocking on the door of a friend. Hospitality was hugely important in those days – it was a matter of honour and of shame in a way that is beyond what we experience now. We can relate though – when we have guests over, we likely clean our house first, we want the food to be well prepared, we may go to a little extra expense to provide something a step above what we may usually prepare for ourselves. In Jesus' time, it would have been crucial to feed the unexpected guest and waking another friend up at midnight to do so was okay. It was actually the grouchy friend who had already gone to bed who would have been seen as acting inappropriately here.

At this point, we have yet another instance where our English translation of what Jesus says distorts the actual meaning of the Greek in which it was written. We hear that the friend knocking at the door will eventually get his friend out of his bed by being persistent. This leads us to picture constantly badgering God with our prayers and God will answer us to shut us up and get us to go away. Keep asking, keep asking...this is what the word "persistence" means to us.

In reality, what Jesus says is not the word "persistence" but rather "shamelessness." Jesus says the grouchy, sleepy friend will eventually get up to answer the door because of the knocker's shamelessness. He means that the knocker can be bold in the familiar relationship he has with his friend – asking for anything at any time. The point is not that God requires pestering in order to answer us. The point is that we can be bold in our familiar relationship with God. We can ask God for anything at any time. If imperfect humans will respond to the boldness of friendship, how much more so will our loving God respond to his children.

What follows is the familiar assurances of Jesus: ask, and it will be given, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened. Again, because we have heard the word "persistence" earlier, we interpret these sayings as part of that persistence. We have learned, though, that Jesus is not advocating for persistence. Jesus is telling us to trust. We have a relationship with God and we are to be boldly confident in that relationship. God hears us. There is a beautiful image in the Book of Revelation of the angels bringing before God bowls of incense, the smoke rising being the prayers of all the people...all of the prayers of all of the people.

This does not mean we can treat God like a genie in a bottle asking for whatever we want and then being disappointed and disillusioned with God when we do not get what we want. Most Canadians only pray when they want something. If God answered every prayer every time would the world be perfect? No. It would be chaos. You'd be praying for rain for your poor wilted lawn while your neighbour is praying for sunshine so that the family reunion picnic won't be a bust. Everyone would be winning the lottery for all sorts of noble reasons – supposedly – and every daredevil would be attempting every stupid stunt imaginable because no one would ever get hurt and, if they did, they would be miraculously healed. A world not in relationship with God is absolutely not ready to have every prayer answered.

But what about those other prayers...like asking for your two year old grandchild to be healed of cancer? If she dies does that mean God didn't hear – or didn't listen or worse, didn't care? You may recall that the first miracle Jesus performs in the Gospel of John is turning jars filled with water into jars filled with wine.

Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell writes of prayer that our job is to fill the jars with water. We must then trust God to do the rest, in his time, in his way, and for the fulfillment of his will (*Praying Through Life*, p.28). God can and does work in the world. We cannot presume that we know how God works or even when and where God works. We trust that God is good and works for good. We know we live in a broken world where people get sick and die. We know that God's goal is the fulfillment of his kingdom on earth as in heaven so that there will be no more tears, no sorrow, no sickness, no dying.

In a moving scene from *Shadowlands*, that wonderful film based on the life of C.S. Lewis, Lewis has returned to Oxford from London, where he has just been married to Joy Gresham, an American woman, in a ceremony performed at her hospital bedside.

She's dying from cancer, and, through the struggle with her illness, she and Lewis have been discovering the depth of their love for each other. As Lewis arrives at the college where he teaches, he's met by Harry Harrington, an Anglican priest, who asks what news there is. Lewis hesitates; then, deciding to speak of the marriage and not the cancer, he says, *"Ah, good news, I think, Harry. Yes, good news."*

Harrington, not aware of the marriage and thinking that Lewis is referring to Joy's medical situation, replies, *"I know how hard you've been praying...Now, God is answering your prayer."*

*"That's not why I pray, Harry,"* Lewis responds. *"I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping."*

Then he adds, *"[Prayer] doesn't change God; it changes me."*

I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God; it changes me.

Prayer is not about getting what we want when we want it. Prayer is being in relationship with our loving God who is moving us and all of creation toward perfection – where being happy isn't being "successful" but, rather, having the joy

of true peace and love, of knowing we live in God's kingdom and who we are and what we do matters in the fulfillment of that kingdom. Part of what matters is prayer and allowing ourselves to be transformed through prayer.

If all of this sounds like it is all about our personal relationship with God and others can fend for themselves forming their own relationship with God, I must point out that relationship with God embraces relationship with others. The two great commandments that sum up all the others are: Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. God's purpose is a three-way street that runs not only between us and God but between us and our fellow humans and with the rest of creation. When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, the prayer does not start with "My Father in heaven" but "Our Father in heaven." I do not ask for my daily bread but our daily bread. Going into God's presence in prayer is to rest in God's love, be bathed in God's love, and to become God's love. And God's love is for the world.

Being in relationship with God is an amazing gift we have been given. Are we ready for it? Prayer does not change God. Prayer changes us.