

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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July 24, 2022

Luke 11:1-13

“Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Really, Jesus. That’s what you’re saying. Then what about that five-year-old girl who came padding barefoot into my friend Jan’s room to tell Jan, who as sixteen, how happy she was that Jan had gone into remission from her leukemia, when the girl, with tiny whips of hair, thin and pale as a thread of cloud, was still dying of cancer, what about her? We prayed for her. We prayed for her hard. She died. And sixteen-year-old Jan was furious. Furious.

Maybe we didn’t have enough faith to save our five year old friend. Maybe it was our fault because we weren’t holy enough.

Maybe we didn’t have enough people praying with us. Maybe if Facebook had been around then, we could have gotten thousands of people to pray. Maybe that would have worked.

Maybe God said “No. I’m not going to heal this child.” Maybe that little girl’s cancer was a part of God’s plan. Maybe God planned for this little five-year-old girl to never learn how to swim in a lake, or feel the touch of a beloved on her shoulder.

Maybe God planned for her to feel the relentless nausea and the pain of chemotherapy, and the crushing defeat when the chemotherapy doesn’t work. Maybe that was part of God’s plan.

I don't know.

Or maybe, we're asking the wrong question. Maybe, instead of asking, "How do we get God to give us what we want?" or "Why doesn't God give us what we want?" maybe we could ask, "How does God give us the one thing we absolutely need? How does God give God's presence, care, love?"

Prayer is not about what we want. Not in the end. It's okay to ask for things we want, because that is a way of letting God into our deepest needs, our most profound mortality, vulnerability, intimacy, being. But in the end, prayer is not about what we want. Prayer is about relationship with God.

So, when Jesus' disciples come to him and say, "Teach us to pray like John taught his disciples," Jesus does not begin with some discourse on how we have to really believe in order for prayer to work. He does not give an elaborate description of God's plan. Jesus says, "Pray like this: Father. . .

Which is not to say, as one of my four-year-old boys at Vacation Bible School kids suggested this week, that God has very big male parts. (He was more explicit than that.) God is neither male nor female, or rather, God is both male and female, since God made both men and women in God's image. When Jesus tells us to speak to God as Father, he is describing a relationship of authoritative care. In which God tells us what to do, out of love, like a good mother or father.

When we pray, we honor that relationship.

Hallowed be your name. May your name be held as holy. May the beauty and life and laughter and hope and justice and love, upon which you build the universe, be in our minds as well. May your being be held as the truth, rather than the illusions of power and selfishness that enslave our souls.

Your kingdom come. May the truth which you are, the unutterable beauty and absolute love which you bring, may they not just float around in some stratosphere somewhere far away, waiting for some time in the future to arrive, maybe when Jesus comes back or maybe when we die. No. That beauty, that life breaks into our world, these days, where we are, now, through us. "Your kingdom come." So, through St. MAM we provide food to people who don't have food here in our neighborhood.

Through Camp Noah, the ELCA provided a place and a space for kids who had been through the tornadoes of Western Kentucky, to talk about how scary it was and all that they lost, and to know that Christ was with them. God's kingdom comes in those moments. Your kingdom come.

Jesus begins with the relationships. Then he goes on to what we need. "Give us this day our daily bread." Notice, he does not say "Give me this day my daily bread," or, "Give my family this day our daily bread," or "Give my country this day our daily bread." Jesus says to pray, "Give us, all humanity, all the whole world, this day our daily bread."

"Forgive us." Again, not just "me." Forgive us. All of us, our sins as we forgive those indebted to us. Lord help us all.

And do not lead us to temptation, save us from the time of trial, the testing. Because we are tiny and mortal, oh Lord, and without you, we fail.

The things we need come out of the relationship with God.

Here is a little of what I mean. When I would work in Hospice, praying with people who were dying and their families, I'd walk into a room. This would happen like once or twice a week. I'd walk into somebody's room and Aunt Millie is dying on the bed. Whole family is there, and the grief and terror has gripped their souls so they can't move. They can barely breathe.

I sit down and I say, "Would anybody like to pray?" and people would start telling me stories. Sometimes they were good and sometimes they were bad. They might tell about Aunt Millie's fried chicken, how it brought the family together, and how she got uncle Fred and uncle Jim to start talking with each other again after they had that falling out over the pickup truck Grampa had left them.

Or maybe Aunt Millie disappeared for twenty years. Left her husband and children and didn't show up again until cancer had grown in her body till she had only a month to live.

Either way, whatever the stories, they would tell the stories. Which meant they were praying, even though they didn't know it. They were laying their Aunt Millie before

God. And I would finish off the prayer. I would give thanks, or ask for forgiveness, usually at least some of both. I'd pray for the family. I'd pray the Lord's prayer.

And it wasn't about me. I know I can put words together, but you don't need nice words to pray. You only need a desire to be with God. You can pray, just as powerfully as I can.

I would finish praying, and the room would have changed. Aunt Millie would still be dying in her bed. People, still sad. But now, God was in the room, and people could breathe.

Prayer sometimes gets us what we want, by miracles. Sometimes not. It always changes things. Often, we're not sure what. It always honors the presence of God.