

The Friend at Midnight
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
July 8, 2018 – AM Sermon
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Luke 11:1-13

Today's parable is in verses 5-8 of this passage. People usually refer to it as the parable of the friend at midnight. We won't just read the parable this morning; we will also include the teaching Jesus offers before and after the parable, because the teaching and the parable go together and they all flow out of a request the disciples have of Jesus: "*Lord, teach us how to pray.*" The disciples make this request after watching Jesus pray. As this passage opens Jesus is finishing his devotions. You can imagine that the disciples see how Jesus prays, they see his devotion, they see the intimacy of his prayer and they say to themselves, "Man. I'd like to pray like that! I wish I were that connected to God! Jesus show me how to pray like you! What do I need to do to get better at prayer?" Let's read the passage and let's hear how Jesus deals with their request. Read Luke 11:1-13.

"*Lord teach us how to pray.*" Obviously the disciples are dissatisfied with their prayer life. The disciples obviously feel like something is missing, so they turn to an expert, in this case Jesus, for help. They will not be the last disciples to make this move. Still today, 2000 years later, disciples are dissatisfied with their prayer life and turn to experts for help. Often they turn to books. There are dozens of books on prayer filling the shelves in Christian book stores. Enter prayer as your search term in Amazon's bookstore and guess how many results you get? Over 50,000! People struggle with prayer and turn to books by experts. Here's another place where I've seen this move toward an expert. I'm at some public event, a social gathering, a church event, a public meal, a banquet. The event is about to begin, the meal is about to start. The host stands up, he welcomes everyone and he explains how things will go today. Then he says, "Let's begin tonight by opening in prayer." Then guess what happens next!? Some of you can guess. A very high percentage of the time the next words out of his mouth will be, "And since we have a pastor with us this evening I'd like to ask him to open with prayer. Peter would you mind leading us?" That happens to me quite a bit. Some of you are probably scrolling back in your own minds right now thinking, "Is he talking about me? Did I do that? I think he might be talking about me!" If it was you, don't worry about it. I don't mind being asked to pray. But the fact that all pastors experience this, shows us that most Christian people feel so-so about their prayer life, and in these situations they feel like a prayer "expert" is more likely to get results.

So what does Jesus the prayer expert tell us uncertain disciples about prayer? In this parable and the teaching that surround it Jesus has something to say about two aspects of our prayer life. First, he has something to say about our technique. I think that one of the reasons people defer to pastors and other 'experts' in prayer situations is that they think their technique is poor, whereas their pastor's prayer technique is good. They are high handicap prayers and the pastors are low handicap prayers. If they pray they will slice their prayers into the woods never to be seen again, whereas the pastor will hit his prayer straight and long and right down the middle. When the disciples say "*Lord, teach us how to pray,*" they are clearly hoping that Jesus show them some technique that will take their prayer game to the next level. Jesus answers their technique question, but I want you to see that he does not say, "Sure I'll teach you how to pray! And when I'm done with you, you will all hit your prayers 300 yards right down the middle!"

Jesus answers their request and his answer is the equivalent of him saying, “Sure. I’ll teach you how to pray. My first lesson is: Don’t worry so much about technique!”

You see, the disciples would have already had lots of training in prayer technique. As good Jewish boys, they would have received prayer instruction from their families and from the rabbis and religious leaders. That instruction would have been fairly rigorous. For instance, as they grew up they would have been taught the prayer of eighteen benedictions – also known as the Amidah. The Amidah is an 18-part prayer that I still the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy. Observant Jews will say this prayer three times a day as an anchor to their prayer life. It is a long prayer. I found a copy online this week and it was 1400 words. That’s two thirds of my sermon this morning. So, the disciples would have had lots of prayer instruction. When they ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, they are almost certainly expecting Jesus to give them some sort of super-expert instruction. They would have expected some sort next-level discipline. “Well, if you really want to be a prayer expert like me, you have to lie on your face for three straight hours while chanting the Psalms in Hebrew.” But Jesus goes in exactly the opposite direction. Jesus simplifies. Jesus replaces the 1400 word Amidah with the 38 word Lord’s Prayer. They were expecting advanced technique designed for people who had black belts in prayer; instead Jesus gave them something like a child’s bed time prayer. Do you see that when Jesus teaches his disciples this 38-word prayer, he’s pushing against the idea of prayer experts and prayer technique?

I remember when I started out my ministry at Woodlawn, my preaching mentor John Timmer would often open with prayer at Council meetings and elder’s meetings. At the beginning I expected those prayers to be ‘expert prayers.’ That is, I expected them to be smooth and flowing and full of beautiful language. Instead I was surprised to hear that he prayed almost hesitantly. He had long pauses. He used small words and he sometimes stumbled over them. He didn’t sound like an expert at all! At first I thought this was weird, but later I grew to really appreciate it. He wasn’t worried about technique. He wasn’t trying to impress the council members with his prayer (as so often happens with public prayers), he was just trying to express plainly and honestly what was on his heart and what was on the heart of the people in that room.

There’s a group of LaGrave members who pray every other Thursday noon here at church. We pray for the needs of our congregation and the world. Jolene gives us a list of things to pray for and we take turns praying for those things. We are not smooth. Sometimes in our prayers we get lost. So someone is praying for a congregation member and they pray something like this, “We pray for Bob who’s just gone through surgery. Please bless him and make him strong. And please bless his wife... what’s her name again? I can’t remember her name.” Then one of the other prayers will shout out the name: “It’s Sylvia” “Oh yeah...please help Sylvia too as she cares for Bob.” This happens a fair bit. It is wonderful to pray with people who are not worried about technique but who just want to talk to God.

I know that the concern about technique and whether or not I’m good at praying can even filter down to dinner table prayers. The young Father knows he I supposed to lead his dinner table prayers with the family, but he has almost never prayed out loud, so he has everyone pray silently, or he finds a prayer to read. That’s OK. At least you’re praying. But I promise you, if your children hear you stumble through an honest, hesitating prayer; if they hear you stumble through a prayer full of ‘umms’ and pauses; if they hear you pray things like, “And ...oh yeah, Lord, please help Uncle John with his cancer, I almost forgot about him”, your children will learn the lesson that Jesus wants to teach in this prayer: “anyone can do this. It is not about expertise and technique, it’s about opening your heart.”

Which brings us to the second thing Jesus is teaching us. When people defer to an expert to pray, one of their concerns is about technique, and Jesus says don't worry so much about technique. The other reason possible reason people might defer to an expert on prayer is deeper and more serious. Sometimes we hesitate in our prayers because we think we are unworthy. Sometimes we shrink from prayer because we think, "Why would God listen to the prayer of a person like me? My mind is full of thoughts that are dark and angry. At work I've been laughing along with all the raunchy stuff just to fit in. Sometimes I contribute to the raunch. I think about my own happiness all the time; I hardly think about God at all. Why would God want to hear from someone like me?" Sometimes, at the bottom of our dissatisfaction with our prayer life is a deep sense of shame.

Jesus' parable is aimed at that sense of unworthiness. Many people interpret this parable incorrectly. Many people read this parable as teaching persistence in prayer. Many people hear Jesus saying you need to be like that friend at midnight. 'You need to keep knocking on God's door! Ask! Seek! Knock! Persist! Then God will open the door and answer you.' When you interpret the parable this way, the focus on the parable is on the work of the person doing the praying. When you interpret the parable this way, a prayer's success depends on the will and skill of the person doing the praying. But in this parable, Jesus' focus is not on the persistence of the knocking neighbor; in this parable Jesus' focus is on the character of the One inside the house.

Jesus tells this parable in a culture that puts a strong value on hospitality. In our culture, it is very possible to imagine a sleepy homeowner saying to an annoying neighbor. "Go Away! I'm asleep! I'll give you your bread in the morning." In that culture such a thing was unthinkable. Even the grouchiest guy in your neighborhood would get up and give bread to his neighbor. We know this because Jesus begins this parable with three Greek words: "*Tis Ex Humon.*" Literally translated those words mean, "Who among you?" This Greek phrase is used when you know the answer to your question is 'Nobody.' In Luke 12:25 Jesus uses the same construction. "*Who among you would by worrying can add a single hour to your life?*" The assumed answer is "Nobody of course!" So...who would refuse bread to a midnight neighbor? Nobody! Even the biggest curmudgeon in your neighborhood would give the man his bread! And if even grouchy curmudgeons gives bread to annoying neighbors who bang on their door in the middle of the night, won't your heavenly Father answer you? When you pray, you are not banging on the door of a neighborhood grouch, you are banging on the door of your Father. He loves you. It doesn't matter what condition you are in, it doesn't matter if you've been away in a far country, when the Father hears you knocking on the door, and he runs down the stairs and throws it open and throws his arms around you and says, "My beloved child! Come in. Come in! Come in!" It's not about the quality of our knocking; it's all about the Steadfast Love of the One on the other side of the door.

How great is the love of the one on the other side of the door? How badly does he want to connect with his children? His desire to connect with his children is so strong that he refuses to stay behind the door. His desire to connect with his children is so strong that Jesus will not wait for his brothers and sisters to come knocking, instead he will leave the safety of his home and go out into the wilds of this world to find us. The Father's desire to connect with his children is so strong that Jesus will go out into the world, he will stand in the middle of the street and say "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest!" The Father's desire to connect with his children is so strong that Jesus will give his life on the cross to destroy the sin and shame that keep us from coming to the Father. The Father's desire to connect with his

children is so strong that he will tear the curtain of the temple in two so that we can walk right into his presence and tell him all the things that are on our heart – because there's nothing that our heavenly Dad wants to hear more than those things.

All over the world there are people stumbling into the heavenly courtroom of the Father and spilling their hearts before Him. There are ministers praying great flowery prayers full of thees and thous. There are simple CRC people filling their prayers with 'Lord just this' and 'Lord just that.' Monks are chanting Latin liturgies, 5 year olds are praying for their dogs, mothers are groaning for their children, there are mystics locked in deep trances, sinners choking out confessions, and there are people mumbling their way through the Lord's Prayer for the millionth time. Technically, it's a big mess. But in the Father's ears it is all the sweet sound of his children's voices.

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