

## Steadfast Love

Luke 11:1-13

Crossroads Christian Church

Colossians 2:6-15

July 24, 2016

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Sometimes the most profound truths can be delivered in the simplest words. Karl Barth was the greatest theologian of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and wrote a whole bookcase full of monumental works, all in very convoluted German, and for the most part difficult to read, even in English. Yet they revolutionized theology. On a speaking tour in the U.S., a reporter asked this giant of faith if he would sum up his theology in a single sentence. Barth agreed, and said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

My own professor of theology at Christian Theological Seminary, Clark Williamson, was profound, intellectually demanding, and given to writing long, elaborate arguments that seemed like they were in English, but you were never quite sure. The seminary offered a continuing education event on prayer. I attended, and listened to Dr. Williamson's highly intellectual discourse on the nature of God. At the end, someone asked, "Dr. Williamson, all that made God seem very abstract. With that in mind, why should I pray?" "Because," boomed the professor, "God listens."

And our gospel passage for today says that not only does God listen, but God cares. Not only does God care, but God answers prayer.

Simple words. Profound truths. Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. These words of Jesus Christ's are an invitation to pray, and a promise that God will respond in a loving way. They take us to the very nature of what the relationship between humans and God can be, they take us to the very nature of God.

Let's go back to Luke. The disciples ask for help, because they see that the power of their master is directly related to his prayer life. Can you teach us some tools, some method of prayer, so that we can be close to God like you are? So Jesus gives them the Lord's Prayer. Here in Luke, it's a shorter version than the one in Matthew, but says essentially the same thing. Here's how Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*.

"Father,

Reveal who you are.

Set the world right.

Keep us alive with three square meals.

Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.

Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.”

Do you see the motion to it? We give ourselves totally and completely to God as our loving parent, and to God’s will, then we ask for what we need—food; forgiveness; protection.

Then, to encourage the disciples to pray, Jesus tells a story, a parable. You can see in the parable the sly humor that Jesus would use, so he could get first a chuckle from the crowd, and then an “oh, yeah.”

There was a family that was sound asleep, only to have their sleep interrupted by someone pounding at the door. Oh, no. It’s that pesky neighbor again. “Go away,” the husband of the family shouts. But the knocking doesn’t stop; the cries of “please, open the door. I need your help” still come. He’ll wake up the whole family! So the man puts on his sternest face and stumps to the door. “Yeah? What is it this time?” The neighbor replies, “Unexpected company came by, and I don’t have anything to feed them. Do you have any bread left? Please?” Now in that culture, far removed from 24-hour supermarkets; not to be able to feed a guest was a mark of disgrace. Hospitality was a requirement. If you failed to be able to feed a guest, not only would you be shamed, but your children, your whole extended family, and your village would be shamed. Finally, the sleepy man gives in—not because he likes the neighbor, not because he wants to help, not because it’s a community expectation, but just because if he doesn’t help, the neighbor will continue to plead, continue to knock, and his family will wake up, his other neighbors will wake up, and he’ll be the one to look bad.

Anybody who has ever traveled with little children will know the truth of this parable. Sometime, after the 137<sup>th</sup> “Mommy, please?” you cave in, not because you love your child, although you do, but just because he’ll drive you crazy if he asks the 138<sup>th</sup> time.

What has the story to do with praying? What’s the connection here? Jesus is saying that if other human beings—weak, sinful, self-serving human beings—can give us what we need, shouldn’t God—powerful, pure, and loving beyond all imagination—do even better? That’s when he gives that incredible invitation: Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. And, as the song goes, “love comes a-tumbling down.”

That doesn’t mean we get everything we ask for in prayer. And it also doesn’t mean that if we don’t get what we ask for, our faith is too weak or insincere. To be facetious, I could ask for a job that paid a million dollars a year, after taxes, but didn’t require any effort on my

part. But if I asked that, I wouldn't be aligning myself to God's will, I'd just be using God as a tool to achieve my own will. It wouldn't even be good for me, as dozens of bankrupt lottery winners can attest. There's a cute little story about a man who was granted a conversation with God. "Is it true that a thousand years are like a minute to you?" "Yes, my son." "And is it true that a million dollars are like a penny to you?" "Yes, my son." "Then can I have a penny?" And God replies, "In a minute."

Even when our prayers are as deep as can be, we don't always get what we asked for. We all pray for a friend or family member who is dying of cancer, but it doesn't happen. A cure doesn't happen, but healing can happen. Maybe it's reconciliation in the family. Maybe it's a sense of peace and hope in eternal life. Jesus prayed desperately in the garden that the cup of death would pass by him, but it didn't happen—but Jesus did give himself to God's will, and through his death, we are all saved, we are all given new life, we are all given resurrection power.

We all need to pray. Fred Craddock tells us this: "We forget. The person who needs to pray, is not just the person in the wheelchair. It's also the young woman standing on the center pedestal at the Olympics receiving a gold medal. It's not just the old man stumbling in the front yard looking for the paper. It's also the young man at the peak of his power. It's not just the old person leaning in the window at the post office asking, "Did the check come today?" It's also the person at the peak of the economy. Whether you are illiterate or just received the hood for the Ph.D., we all need to pray."<sup>1</sup> (unquote).

Jesus also invites his disciples—invites us—to tie our own actions and our prayers together. The Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell says "Jesus tells the disciples to pray for the kingdom, for their daily bread, and for forgiveness. Jesus then goes on to teach that we must be persistent, but also to meet the needs of others—we pray for our daily bread but we ought to answer the knock at the door asking us for bread. We know how to give gifts to others, and God will give to us. But it is a both/and: our prayer must also have action. As we pray for God to give us our daily bread, we ought to make sure those around us have enough to eat as well and use what we have to meet the needs of others.

Prayer, you see, puts God's will first, because we come to trust God's love, a love that never gives up.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, "Lord, Teach us to Pray," in *Patterns of Preaching*, ed. by Ronald J. Allen, Chalice Press, 1998, p. 35.

And what's more, it's a love that we can not only receive, but we can give. It's an active love, not just a warm fuzzy feeling. It's a love that works actively for the well-being, the shalom, of another. It's the love we express when we change a stinky diaper at midnight, or sweat on a mission trip at noon. It's the love that causes us to work for justice and dignity for those who are oppressed; those who struggle to stay alive in a harsh world. It's a love that we give and that we receive."<sup>2</sup>

One of the surprises of this story is that God wants to be in relationship with us. God knows us better than we can know ourselves, and cares for us more deeply than we can ever comprehend. We are made for that love, to be in relationship with God. But, God has made us to live in a loving way, to be in relationship, to help others as God has related to and helped us. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>2</sup>Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, "Resources for July 24, 2016, Rev-o-lution.org