

Luke 11:1-13

11:1 He 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."

11:2 so he said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come.

11:3 Give us each day our daily bread.

11:4 And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

11:5 And 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,

11:6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'

11:7 And 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.'

11:8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

11:9 "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

11:10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

11:11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish?

11:12 Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion?

11:13 If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Sermon: When You Pray

As a divinity school student at Wake Forest, I interned at Grace Baptist Church in Statesville. Part of my training required thirteen mentoring sessions per semester. Each week, I would meet with our pastor Gary West at the local coffee shop – our conversations lasted the length of at least one twelve-ounce cup, maybe two if they were serving an especially-good variety of Larry’s Beans. And occasionally, if the conversation was really important, we’d have a third cup.

I don’t remember all the details of these conversations. But I do remember a question that sparked a three-cup conversation. We were talking about prayer. And it just kind of slipped out, but I asked, “Well, Gary, tell me something...how do you offer prayer in a way that’s not...what’s the word I’m looking for...creepy...yeah, creepy?”

I expressed to Gary that throughout my life, but particularly in the divinity school setting, I had seen and experienced examples of prayer done really well, but also, examples of prayer done in ways that were

really unsettling. And I had noticed that prayer done well could be so healing, and so profound, and so honest, and so moving. And prayer done poorly could be so off-putting.

Gary smiled, and laughed a little. He said: “This may not help you, but you just have to feel your way through it. Don’t go guns-blazin’ into a hospital room or a home ready to pop open your Bible, or lay hands on someone. Listen. Really listen. They’ll ask for what they need.”

Gary told me to watch others pray. He told me to think of prayer as a conversation. And he told me that the more I prayed, and particularly the more I prayed in public, I would develop my own style and my own comfort level.

After that conversation, I took his advice. I paid close attention to how certain people around me prayed. And I still do. I want to tell you about a few people who stand out for the kind of prayer I seek to emulate:

My friend, our friend, Don Hinton was a high school teacher over across the road at Millbrook High School for many years. Don remembered that many of his students would come in on test day, and pray that God would help them do well. Don would remind them: “Don’t pray that God will help you on test day. Pray that God will give you the discipline and drive and desire and determination to study and prepare in the days and weeks leading up to your test.”

My predecessor, Andrea Dellinger Jones, when offering prayer for others, never assumes she knows their petitions. She always asks that person, “What is it that *YOU* would like for me to pray for today?”

I have fond memories of visiting Marie Mason over at her home on Millbrook Road. She told me a lot of good stories, but it's one of her prayers that I remember the most. On her 98th birthday, her prayer/birthday wish was that no child in Wake County would go hungry that evening.

I really miss seeing Woody Catoe on a weekly basis. One day, I met Woody for lunch at the Village Deli. As our meal was served, we waited awkwardly, each wondering, "Does this guy offer a blessing in restaurants?" Woody broke the silence. "I don't close my eyes," he said. "But I am asking God to bless this food, and I am grateful for our opportunity to break bread together. Amen."

I love Woody's approach, but it also makes me think of my Grandmother Margie. I've never ever seen anyone's eyes closed tighter than hers when she prayed. For my grandmother, the posture of her prayer helped her be present.

My mom, Kathy Stillerman, is a stickler for the use of the word "we" when leading community prayer. She laments when folks say, "God I just pray..." when they should really be saying, "God, we just pray."

I liked my colleague Tillie Duncan's solution to this dilemma so much I use it for every invitation to prayer: "Would you join your prayer with mine?"

And I have SO much gratitude for the prayers offered by Jessica and Phil each week. Jessica reminds us that good prayer can be prose, and Phil, that the piano offers its own version of transcendent language.

And it's hard to argue with Anne Lamott's succinctness. She offers the only three words you have to say: "Help. Thanks. Wow!"

Regardless of who we are, or where we are in our faith journey, prayer is a mysterious thing. And confident or not, we're always left to wonder how we should approach prayer.

Friends, there is good news. We are not alone in such an endeavor. The disciples struggled with the very same thing. In today's pericope they ask Jesus for advice. And thank goodness for Jesus' patience and counsel. Jesus offers the disciples (and us as well) some guidelines.

"When you pray, say 'Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.'"

In other words, we are encouraged to address this parental source of ours with reverence. When we speak to God, we speak to our creator, to our very source. And this source is holy! But this holy source is not some stranger. They are loving, affectionate, infinitely close. This holy source, for Jesus, was a father: a mix of power and wisdom and compassion and connectedness. Christ tells us to address this connected, familiar, holy being.

If the image of Father works for you, great! If not, choose another metaphor, one that allows you to see your own likeness in God, and use this greeting to help you create a similar sense of connectedness and familiarity and holiness with your maker. Our baptismal liturgy this morning uses the Trinity of Life, Wisdom, and Hope. Maybe that's more approachable for you.

Next, Jesus reminds us that God's justice and God's presence are not things reserved for another life and another dimension. We are called to demand God's kingdom or kin-dom in this world, in this lifetime. And when we proclaim God's kingdom or kin-dom come, we also proclaim that God has given us gifts to help make such a place come about. And I dare say, God longs for each of us to use our gifts to the fullest.

"Give us each day, our daily bread."

That sounds a little direct. And truth be told it is. But shouldn't we have confidence in this good God of ours? When we seek our daily bread, we share in the story of those who found manna in the wilderness. Jesus seems to be saying, "God we don't always know HOW you will provide, but we know you WILL. And so we ask!"

I believe, too, such a statement ought to make us aware of the privileges we inherit. So many of us are fed beyond measure. And yet hunger is rampant in our own neighborhoods, and dire in places like Gaza. I wonder if this line in the prayer holds us accountable to the love of God and neighbor we claim to profess? I sure hope so.

"And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."

Would that it were! But what a thing to pray! Jesus once said "my yolk is easy and my burden is light." And I bet ours would be too, if we didn't let ourselves become so weighed down by resentment, or anger, or jealousy. When Jesus instructs us to pray these lines, it's a reminder for us to mimic the love and forgiveness of the One we follow – a love and forgiveness born of God.

Let me also mention that we say, “trespasses,” in our traditional recitation of this prayer, and others say “debts.” For me, *trespasses* are a helpful translation for the broadness of their reach; the word describes the variety of ways we can intentionally and unintentionally wound one another, go to places we ought not go. Some will argue for *debts*, pointing out that Jesus did preach about economic justice. And I would agree, but I will not reduce Jesus to an economic populist. He was so much more than that. I also believe that Jesus participated in an economy of grace, something that can’t be commoditized or earned. And I’m not crazy about the word *sins*, because I don’t believe we are inherently flawed, nor do I believe that we offer every prayer from a place of solemnness, sorrow, or shortcoming.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

Keep us focused, God. Remind us that when we are nestled in your community of love, the demands of this world are never too big to manage. When we are in your presence, you “keep us” and “lead us” and “shade us,” just as the Psalmist proclaims.

Friends, here’s what I believe: In today’s pericope, Jesus offers us a style of prayer that isn’t creepy. We receive a prayer that is honest. And authentic. And instructive. The words call us into the power and presence of the One we serve. We’re invited to model our own words and actions after his; to make the prayer our own expression. I believe that means we can choose the inflections, and even the more modern, more personal language that draws us toward the Spirit in which this prayer was initially prayed. When we say the words aloud, our words aloud, we are reminded of how God acts in the world. And when we repeat them, again and again and again, we are reminded of how Christ calls us to live.

When You Pray
Pentecost Seven, 7/27/2025
Bob Stillerman
Luke 11:1-13



Recognize the divine. Name Them. Once you've named Them, bid that the divine dimension come about. And recognize that when we work to bring about God's kin-dom, our needs are provided for, our relationships are enhanced by mutual love and respect, and our lives are funneled down sunlit paths and still waters.

May God give us the courage to pray this prayer, our prayer, with conviction, today, and every day.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have trespassed against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory. Forever. Amen.