

Exodus 19:1-11 ~ Luke 11:1-13
Lord, Teach Us to Pray
 First of Six-Sermon Series on The Lord's Prayer
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Introduction to Gospel Reading:

Once there were three hermits living on an island for a long time, isolated from their bishop. They could remember only one prayer that they kept praying over and over: "We are three, You are Three, have mercy on us. Amen." When the Bishop got word of this, he was very concerned. So, he jumped on the next ship to give them guidance about proper prayer. Suddenly off the stern of the ship, he spied a huge ball of light skimming across the ocean coming closer and closer to the ship. As it got closer, he saw the three hermits running on top of the water. Once they were on board the ship, they said, "We are so sorry but we have forgotten some of your teachings, Reverend Bishop—Would you please instruct us again?" The Bishop shook his head and replied meekly, "Forget everything I have taught you and continue to pray in your old way."ⁱ

They may have had only the one prayer—but obviously they were doing something right. What was it? In the story you are about to hear from Luke 11, one day Jesus' disciples, the twelve who were Jesus' closest friends, ask their Lord to teach them how to pray. Yes, this was another teaching that occurred according to Luke after Jesus had "set his face to go to Jerusalem." Another pivotal teaching during Jesus' "boot camp for disciples" before he would be crucified.

They had probably noticed that Jesus prayed a lot. In fact, it seemed central to everything he did. And they, like us, probably tried to pray, but wondered if they were doing it right. So this time while he was praying, perhaps with a certain urgency as he knew what lay just ahead of him in Jerusalem, I picture his disciples nudging each other quietly, not wanting to disturb him, "You ask him....No, you ask him....Oh, all right, here goes...." We don't know which of the twelve asked him, but we do know how he responded to all of them. Here it is in the Gospel According to Luke, Chapter 11, beginning with verse 1.

Sermon:

"Here's My Heart" was the theme of the Presbyterian Youth Triennium this past week at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. I can hardly express the joy, the excitement, the Holy Spirit power of 5,000 Presbyterian high school students from across the country and the world, worshipping together every day for almost two hours. And loving it! Clapping and dancing, listening to sermons, praying together. It was loud, and crazy. And holy. What an amazing reversal to look across hundreds of people gathered for worship and have the older grown-ups (like me) stand out because we were so far and few between. On the big stage was an enormous electronic heart graphic with the phrase "Here's my Heart" blazoned across the middle of it. On Thursday, in our small groups, we all wrote a prayer on a slip of paper and put it inside a balloon and blew them up. Each of us did at least two. We had been studying Luke 15 and the parable of the Prodigal Son, thinking about God seeking, yearning for all of God's lost children. God, for whom 99 out of 100 sheep is not good enough. So, the prayer prompt was to write the name of a person or situation that needs God's saving and put it on the paper that would go in the balloon.

On Friday, when we arrived at the big stage in Elliot Hall, the curtain was closed. At the Call to Worship, the curtains opened and the heart graphic had turned into the same graphic, only now it had transformed into thousands of prayer balloons. Definitely a "wow" moment – not only for the stunning visual, but for me, the thought of all those prayers, all that asking, seeking, knocking represented by this

spectacle. On the first day of Triennium, our theme was “Tune my heart” which is another three-word prayer that may not necessarily produce a huge ball of light for us to skim across Lake Michigan on, but if prayed with the sincerity, humility, and focus the hermits had—can do something even bigger. The simple prayer “Tune my heart,” can lift us, launch us out of the puddle of muddle we probably woke up in, or may worked ourselves into in the course of a day. I think we know what it feels like to be out of tune, out of sync, out of sorts. True prayer, honest prayer, as Jesus taught us tunes our hearts. Gets us back in gear and out of fear: so that we can get going on doing our part to let God’s way of Divine Love heal and restore our beautiful, yet broken world.

Let’s talk about tuning for a moment. How many of you have ever in your life played an instrument in a band or an orchestra? Those of you whose hands are not raised, have you ever attended a band (any kind of band, rock band, big band, dance band) or orchestra concert? OK, that’s just about everyone. *Hopefully* you, your band, or the musicians at the concerts you attended tuned their instruments before they began to play music. An oboe, a pitch pipe, a tuning fork, an app on your phone-- will give you the note – an A-440 or maybe a B flat pitch. And everyone must listen to their A. If it is too low (flat) or too high (sharp) then adjust by moving a valve or turning the peg if they are playing a cello, for instance. I began tuning my cello when I was 10 years old. And I’m here to tell you, some days that was the hardest part! Four pegs, four strings—one or two would be right, the A & the D strings, then turning the third peg the G string could throw the other two out and you’d have to start over.

Why do we do this? Although we all have on our own part to play, we need to listen, get the pitch, and adjust our instrument so that our notes will harmonize correctly. Only when we get quiet enough to tune and listen (whether it’s our voices or our instruments) make beautiful music together. If we tune to the wrong note, or if we don’t tune to anyone but our own note, we will be lost and stay lost in the ugly, toxic world of hate, world of hurt, driven by fear.

But how *do* we tune our hearts to God? What does God give us to serve as a pitch pipe or tuning app? We can be thankful that one disciples got up the courage to ask Jesus this question. They may have been embarrassed to ask at this point. Jesus had likely taught them about prayer before. But their time with Jesus on earth was running out. They didn’t know when they’d get the chance again. And Jesus responded not only with the prayer that we will take some time to explore together in the weeks ahead, but he also responded by teaching them the importance of praying at all. With story and metaphors about stones and snakes and scorpions, he is basically imploring us to ask and ask, again and again.

That is the beginning of true prayer and the heart of my message today: Don’t be afraid to ask, and to risk listening for what God has to tell you. Don’t be afraid to knock on new doors because you don’t know what’s on the other side. I believe that was part of the power of Triennium for me. Being in the company of thousands of teens pushing themselves out of their comfort zones, knocking on doors they didn’t even know existed until last week. Doors into the holy zone. We would start our daily Delegation Group time often with one-word around the circle to describe how they were feeling about Triennium so far. Words like “exciting, exhausting, hot,” were common. But also “confusing, new, different.” God was pouring the Holy Spirit upon all of us, like the confetti that burst forth with the final benediction over the whole crowd yesterday morning.

Jesus is teaching us here in this text that prayer is way more than wishful thinking wrapped in religious language. If that’s all we’re doing: it’s not prayer. Prayer is what tunes our heart and opens our eyes to see God right here in this mud bound world. Prayer can help you to see what God sees in you. Prayer can help us see what God sees in this old world of ours, this one that God chose to save by

becoming a human being like us. If you'd like to help align yourself with the God who freed Israel from Egypt and who resurrected Jesus from the dead, yes that God—our realignment can start right here. This short, simple opening phrase that we say so often we may not think about it, it can help us listen for the A-440, the perfect A, the almighty A: Creator God, Redeemer, Sustainer. Yes, that one. The one who became Jesus to show us what Divine Love looks like in human form.

Today we're looking at the first phrase, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." The one that gets us started. I don't know about you, but getting started is often the hardest part of praying. It's kind of like the saying that the hardest part of going for a run is the first 25 feet, that is getting up the will to do it, putting on your running clothes, and getting yourself out the door or on the treadmill. How does Jesus tell us to start? Start by naming and praising God, for who God is. As the quote on our bulletin cover reminds us, "Praise is the doorway into the movable feast where heaven and earth are found to intersect."ⁱⁱ I believe taking a breath, looking up, to naming and praise God, is like hitting the reset button; or the ctrl + alt + delete on our mental or emotional computer, when that little blue circle is just spinning and spinning and spinning. It doesn't matter whether we are feeling in the mood or not. Especially when you've had too much earth, too many transactional kinds of conversation, too many hurts, slights, seen too much violence, and ugliness. Take a breath, put on your spiritual running shoes, and start praying, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name." That one phrase can be enough. (And thankfully praying doesn't require a shower afterwards—typically.)

This first phrase that Jesus teaches us, as we started to discuss during Discovery Time: the "Our" shifts us from the I-me-It's about me and only me, into the land of "our" – the God who is the God of all of us, who made all of us in God's image. Another sermon, but the word "Our" can serve as a reminder (and boy do we all need one) that it is about us, all of us, not just about me or mine. The next word, "Father" recalls how close God is—like the Father who welcomes the prodigal home, and like a mother who will not forget her nursing child, God as close as a good parent. Then comes this churchy word, "hallowed" which means "holy" and helps us acknowledged out loud that while God is closer than our next breath and knows us by name God is also utterly, holy, complete unlike us, mysterious, beyond us. God is not us. God is mysterious and always beyond our comprehension. Always more than we can possibly imagine. That's why we pray to God and not just to ourselves. The first phrase of this prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples then and now, starts us off right by naming and praising, acknowledging God's loving parental presence AND God's holy otherness.

I don't know about you, but after the week we've had in the news and across our national and global political landscape, you may be wondering how low can we go? Where is this hate mongering, and political conniving leading us? It almost seems like we are running farther and farther away from Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Especially the neighbors who are different from us. Here's the good news—while we may be dismayed, disheartened, distraught by what we see going on saying I've given you all that you need to take the high road. I've given you all you need to let Divine Love win. I see God waiting on the horizon, scanning its contours—like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. God, never, never giving up on us. God ever ready for earth and heaven to intersect.

Our final day at Triennium our focus was the story of the disciples in the boat when a storm comes up and Jesus is not with them. Then they look up and across the water they get scared because they think they are seeing a ghost walking on the water towards them. Then, they realize it is Jesus who when he says, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." (Matthew 14:27). If you are afraid today—maybe you are scared to really open your heart in prayer to God. Maybe you are losing heart about the direction our country is going in. Or by what is going on inside of you. My friends, I have good news: "Take heart" from

the vision of 5,000 Presbyterian teens being commissioned to go and spread the love of God made known in Christ; 5,000 Presbyterian teens to go and do something to mend this broken world. I did. And hearing from our own teen participants this morning has surely helped you to take heart, as well. If they can take a risk, so can we. For Christ's sake.

ⁱ Story originally told by Leo Tolstoy, retold by Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, (HarperCollins: San Francisco, CA, 1992), 80.

ⁱⁱ John Koenig, "The Heartbeat of Praise and Thanksgiving," *Weavings*, Volume VII, Number 6, p. 25.