

BUGGING AND BOTHER LUKE 11:1-13 GENESIS 18:20-32
NEW STORE/MAYSVILLE CHURCHES JULY 24, 2022

Ah, this morning's New Testament text is rich with possibilities. On the one hand, there is the story of Jesus teaching His first disciples to pray. On the other, we have a possible conflict between Jesus' crowd and John the Baptizer's followers.

Then, you have the differences in all the versions of the prayer Jesus gave to His disciples. *Matthew's* telling of what happened also differs in some details from what we just heard according to *Luke*. Here, the context is changed. The prayer abbreviated. And, some of the words are different: sins and debts, for example. And then, *Mark*, the other Gospel writer, whom Biblical scholars mostly agree wrote the oldest, intact story of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus the Christ, and whose telling parallels both *Matthew* and *Luke* doesn't really lay out such a complete prayer – only that when we pray, we are to ask for forgiveness in response to and in hope that God our Father will forgive us.

And the final possibilities come back to the rest of the verses in our text; those of the parable and its interpretation, that together make an attempt to explain, teach, expand, even interpret what Jesus was saying about prayer, God, our relationship to God and to our neighbor, and goodness knows what else we could draw out of these 13 verses.

Whew! I don't know about you, but it could take a while to try to address all of this in one sermon. It's a good thing it's not next week when we have our 5th Sunday lunch! {wait for it}

Seriously, one of the challenges preachers have as I'm sure you've heard once or twice, is to listen to the text and hear God's word that is to be brought to you the congregation. And so this morning I want to focus on three things that come out of my reading of the text in

Luke. First, the import of the parable that follows the model prayer given here. Second, some reasons our prayer life isn't always where it could be. And, third, briefly, a couple of reflections on the model prayer here in *Luke*, and how they might help.

The *Gospel According to Luke* probably has the greatest number of Jesus' parables. (I should have looked this up to make sure and how many, but somewhere I recall reading that *Luke* has more than all the other gospels combined). And the parable that follows *Luke's* version of the Lord's Prayer is unique to *Luke's* telling of the Gospel. Here we read about a person who goes over to his neighbor to borrow some food in the middle of the night because a friend from out of town drops by unexpectedly. According to the parable, the neighbor gets up out of bed, goes downstairs, gets food from the pantry, and gives it to his distressed neighbor, because this person is bugging him persistently.

I don't know about you, but nowadays when someone bugs me – keeps tugging at my sleeve, repeatedly knocks at my door, I'm less inclined to give that person what they want. I may do it in the end, but

I'm not sure I'd do it cheerfully.

On television, there used to be a silly sitcom called *The Big Bang Theory*. It's about 4 socially-inept scientists and a female neighbor to 2 of the men. The woman is the foil for the scientists' faux pas, missteps, and outright awkward behavior. One of the scientists, Sheldon, is a bit obsessive and compulsive. Whenever he crosses the landing to knock on his neighbor Penny's door, he always knocks 3 times then calls her name. He does this repeatedly until she opens the door – usually with a great expression of exasperation on her face.

I imagine that would be like the neighbor who was being bugged by his neighbor in the middle of the night. The door is answered, but with a great deal of exasperation. Yet, the funny thing about both Sheldon's knocking and Penny's opening the door and the two neighbors in Jesus' parable, no matter what time of day or night, the actions demonstrate a close (dare we say, loving?) relationship.

Have you ever noticed that you will put up with someone bugging you

Have you ever noticed that you will put up with someone bugging you more easily if you like, or even love, the person doing the bugging? And, have you ever thought of that in the context of your relationship with God and prayer?

A while back it was all over the news: *Prayer extends life!* We've also heard stories about TV preachers saying that prayer brings wealth or happiness or almost anything else that people desire. And, I won't say that prayer can't do all the things people claim. In my own life, I

have seen prayer answered. I have also been there when it hasn't. Still, I pray – not as often as I could or should but I do pray on a regular basis.

Yet, did you know that American Christians only pray an average of 4 minutes a day? And, an average time for pastors (at least among Lutherans surveyed) is 7 minutes a day? The reason, it seems, is that Americans are busy – very busy. The late Dr. Arndt Halvorson, church consultant and researcher, noted that the first thing to go in the life of a busy pastor is his or her prayer time. But it's not just pastors; I hear it from congregation members in many of the churches where I've served. It always amazes me when I moderate Session and I ask for a moment of prayer before or after a big decision or committee presentation, and some elder is tapping his foot or harrumphing when I say, "Let us pray..." Too busy;- got to get the work done – got to get the meeting over with – leaving the impression that the time spent in prayer is wasted. (Good thing that doesn't happen here....)

Still, that sense of busyness leads to the second reason we don't pray: we don't believe it does any good. Basically, many people, Christians included, see prayer as essentially talking to one's self. At best, it is a pep talk – a psychological motivator to get you going in the right direction, or to become a better person. At worst, prayer viewed as in talking to yourself is seen as crazy behavior.

And then, there are the studies on the effects of prayer, like I

mentioned earlier. Some of the earliest were done in the mid-1800s in Great Britain. One looked at the number of prayers offered on behalf of the royal family and the efficacy of those prayers, and concluded that the royal family was just as screwed up as anyone else, therefore, all the prayers in England didn't help the royals.

A second one has become a classic study repeated over the decades with mixed results. This one took two hospital wings: Wing A and Wing B. People in neighboring churches prayed intensely for all the patients in Wing A and none in Wing B. The healing rate in both wings turned out to be about the same. As the study has been repeated over the years, there have been times when a statistically positive change is shown. But, the general conclusion by the scientific community is that prayer doesn't have any effect – so why bother?

At best, many people see prayer as like star-gazing; it's a lovely and beautiful experience, yet, just as gazing at the stars doesn't change the stars, prayer doesn't seem to change God – so, if it doesn't do any good, again, why bother?

A third reason American Christians don't pray very much (remember 4 minutes a day average) is conflicting expectations and experiences. God is supposed to protect us from harm, disasters, and illness. When God doesn't do this, one often concludes that there is no God. Using this logic, then Paul should have been protected from his "thorn;" especially after asking God three times to remove it. Or, Job should never have had his life so devastated; losing wife, children,

farm, and all but three (dubious) friends. Look at Mary, mother of Jesus – she should have never seen her Son hanging from the cross. And then there's Jesus himself – didn't he ask that that cup be removed? But these prayers weren't answered in the way **we** expect; so again, many people, Christians included, have come to believe that prayer doesn't do any good.

And, finally, we don't pray simply because we don't have a close

relationship with God. You can't have a close relationship with anyone without persistent intimate conversation – that is, listening twice as much as speaking. It's true in marriage, it's true with family and friends, and very true with God. Four minutes a day doesn't make for much intimacy.

So, where does this leave us? First, let's look at Jesus. He prayed a lot – especially when you look at how He's portrayed in *Luke*.

Second, His relationship with God was so close that He tells His disciples to use the family word for God – Abba – Daddy – or Papa. I don't push that name too much, but when I think of addressing God in prayer, I don't envision a stereotypical Victorian-age-like commanding figure before whom I have to cringe with fear. Rather, I think of God in loving terms, like a good parent whose high expectations for me I want to joyfully fulfill. Jesus says to start a prayer with "*Our Father...*"

Second, the prayer as Jesus taught His disciples to say comes with the implied admonition to do it regularly, even daily. We are to be bugging and a bother to God – just like the persistent neighbor or widow, just like Paul said to the Roman churches – be constant in

prayer, like he said to the Ephesians – pray at all times, or to the Colossians – be steadfast in prayer, and to the Thessalonians – pray constantly.

And we are to pray in trust and faith that our prayers will be answered. Perhaps not in our time frames or in the way we ask, expect, even hope – but they will be answered in God's time, in God's way, and for God's purpose and work of the Kin-dom.

So, let me encourage you to pray – keep bugging and being a bother to God and to yourself. Prayer changes – not God, but you. It's been said that persistent prayer is like sailors who cast an anchor rope around a rock. As they pull on the rope, it appears they are pulling the rock to the ship, but in reality, they are pulling the ship to the rock. Let that rock be the Triune God. Let the anchor rope be constant, persistent, intimate prayer. And, let God who is in Christ Jesus change your heart and life through the power of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

Let us pray: Holy and grace-giving God, we come humbly in prayer

this day. We acknowledge that while You call us to pray, we are many times reluctant to do so. And, yet, we pray. We pray because we want to tell You our troubles, to ask for Your help, to find strength to do what we know in our hearts that which You have set before us, and to discern who You are calling us to be. Let our prayers be worthy of Your call, Your grace, Your mercy, Your love and peace. Hear all our prayers through our Lord, Your Son, Jesus. Amen