

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

July 28, 2019, The 7th Sunday of Pentecost/17th Sunday Ordinary Time

Psalm 85, Luke 11:1-13

ASK!

You're in the line in the grocery store and the begging begins. You've been this child, you've parented this child, you've watched this child.

"I need that toy, gimme, gimme, I want that toy NOW!

I neeeeed those M&M's buy them for me, I waaaaant them...."

The heels start kicking the cart, the angry crying begins, other customers look away, the crocodile tears begin to roll, the volume goes up several decibels...

"Gimme what I waaaaant! I want it NOW! I neeeeed it!"

I've always had the fear of being that child in the way I pray. I've worked really hard to avoid the gimme prayers, the "I want" prayers for little things in my life that are more like cheap plastic toys and M&M's at the grocery store, than things I really want or need. I've tried to tamp down the feelings and words, when I've been leaning toward kicking my heels and yelling at God loud enough to get what I think I want and need.

Until those moments that I couldn't help it.

Nine years ago, I was at my friend Deb's funeral. Deb was my Minnesota friend who died of Lou Gehrig's Disease. I had been asked to speak at her funeral. As I sat in the church moments before I was supposed to go up to the pulpit, my contact become totally adhered to my eye, because I'd been crying so much. I wear gas permeable contacts and when they stick to your eye, it is a true issue sometimes. No matter how much I tried to get it to budge, but it wouldn't. Not only did it hurt, but I couldn't see without it.

So I prayed one of those prayers I try to avoid, and I started by reminding God of how well I've done at avoiding those prayers: "OK God, you know I don't ask you for stuff like this very often, you know that, but you have got to help me get this contact back in place. You know how much I want to honor Deb, you know how hard this is, but I can't do this right, if I can't see. You have to help me NOW... I need this contact to move."

It's one of those prayers that I would tell other people, 😊 like all of you, was a perfectly acceptable prayer. I needed help. But I've had this long stubborn tradition of not praying for lost car keys, parking spaces, stuck contacts, and getting the things I want, but don't really need.

And yes, by the way my contact loosened off my eye and back into place. And yes, I did say thank you to God!

I was reminded of that stubborn vow to only pray for certain things, and specifically that prayer at Deb's funeral, as I spent time with the Lord's Prayer and the passage around it this week. Because what I ran into this week was God's love for us. I ran into God's love for all that our lives hold as I listened to Jesus teach his disciples then, and now, how to pray.

Spoiler alert, I really do believe that God loves us completely, and cares for the big and little things in our lives. Help with lost keys, and help with a lost heart in seasons of grief.

Help with stuck contacts, and stuck relationships and stuck fears.

You get the idea, so let me tell you why.

The disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, and Jesus puts this prayer right into the midst of daily life with the way he starts the prayer. There are some who see Jesus teaching us exact words to pray in the Lord's Prayer. It is true that by the early centuries of the church people prayed this prayer in worship and some prayed it daily. Clearly it is a basic part of praying for most Christians.

Others see the prayer Jesus taught in the gospels as a guide or outline for how to pray any prayer. I think both ways of seeing the Lord's Prayer have their merits, but that is a sermon for another day.

Today I want us to focus more on what Jesus is telling us about God's love for us, in teaching us this prayer.

Jesus begins his teaching with daily life by beginning the prayer with the word "Father," which in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke, is Abba. Jesus didn't teach his disciples to pray with one of God's more distancing names: Creator of the Universe, Holy of Holies, Lord of Lords, but with the name Father.

Starting this prayer with the name Father for God, in the best sense of the word father, reminds us that we are praying to someone who knows us, loves us, cares for us, wants the very best for us, and who is ultimately in charge of our lives.

Jesus begins his teaching on prayer by saying this is about a relationship between you and God. This is about talking to the one who loves you.

The beginning of the prayer reminds us that prayer is a conversation between us and our loving Father or Parent in heaven. I believe it must be said, that for some, praying the words "our father" are very difficult because of the abuse experienced from their earthly father. Jesus is not locking us into one way to address God. It is just as appropriate to pray: our Mother, our Parent, our Creator, our Protector.

If I were to say that everyone must use the words "our Father" in every prayer they prayed, that would be another form of abuse. God is so much more than our descriptive words for God. Part of developing our own lives of prayer is finding a great variety of ways to address God.

I believe what Jesus wants us to hear in *this* prayer is that God is close to us, God cares for us, God loves us.

Jesus is calling us to turn all that our lives hold toward God first,
not toward what we think we need.

You may have noticed in Luke's gospel that it is shorter than what we pray on Sunday mornings. You'll find the longer version, closer to what we pray, in Matthew 6.

We start the Lord's Prayer recognizing that we are in relationship with our God who loves us. And then we pray that as we turn our attention to our God in Heaven, that God's name and being would be holy in our lives, and that God's kingdom would be known here on earth, not just in heaven; here on earth in us, in our lives, in our world.

Jesus taught his disciples then, and us here this morning, to focus ourselves on who God is: above us, greater than us, looking over us, and loving us.

If this is how we start praying the Lord's Prayer, and other prayers we pray, then I think it moves us pretty quickly from kicking our heels against the grocery cart, crying out "I want, I need," to focusing on who our God is first and foremost.

It changes our hearts when we slow ourselves down, and really hear the words of this prayer, that we sometimes pray without thinking, because it is part of our Sunday habit.

Our Father, our Mother, our Parent, who knows us, loves us, cares for us, and wants the very best for us,
 may your name, your being, be holy in our lives,
 may your kingdom of love and justice be here on earth as it is in heaven.

Only after focusing on who God is, then the Lord's Prayer moves us toward asking for what we need.

Because we trust in who God is, we can ask for so much more than plastic toys and M&M's:
 Jesus says: pray give us each day:
 daily bread-- daily being sustained by what feeds us,
 give us each day
 forgiveness for our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us,
 give us each day
 protection from the times of trial, or as we pray, deliver us from evil.

The prayer ends, and Jesus continues to teach us about praying.

Jesus says be persistent in your asking God for what you need.

Ask like a neighbor who has run out of bread, who has visitors late at night. In the culture of Jesus' day, not offering hospitality to a guest was one of the worst things a person could do. It would bring shame to your family if you didn't feed a late-night guest who arrived. It would bring shame on your village.

Jesus says, ask God for what you need with the same drive you'd have if you'd run out of bread to welcome a visitor. Be persistent.

And then those wonderful words: "ask, and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks received, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

And then maybe because Jesus knows that disciples can sometimes be a bit thick-headed when it comes to asking for what they need, he gives one more example. Which spoke pretty loudly to me and my remembrance of that contact stuck on my eye and my desperate prayer. This is in the wonderful Message Translation. Jesus said:

"Here's what I'm saying:

"...Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This is not a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing—you're at least decent to your own children. And don't you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?"

Many of us are so good at giving to others, asking them what they need, but we're not always good at naming our own true needs.

But Jesus says when you pray, really think about what you need and ask for it. This brings us back to my story of the contact lens stuck to my eye.

If I believe that God loves me completely, and I do,

then why wouldn't God care that I was in pain and couldn't see in the moment, when I was grieving the loss of a beloved friend and wanted to honor her good life the best way I knew how?

With this changed perspective, my story of asking for help with my contact, isn't like a child kicking the grocery cart demanding plastic toys and M&M's. Instead, it's like a child turning to her parent and saying I'm hurting and I need help now.

We're called to take Jesus' words to heart: "Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need."

In the face of God's creative love in each of our lives,
 trusting that God wants the very best for us,
 doesn't it become a sign of faith when we name what we need to our God in
 prayer?

It's what the Lord's Prayer teaches us to do.
 In both the big things and the little things
 we can trust that God cares for us and what we need, and so we can ask.

Learning to pray, through the gift of the Lord's Prayer, invites us to bask in the love of God in our lives. It asks us to trust that love and in the words to Jesus to:

ask with persistence,
 to ask, to seek, to knock,
 and to trust that God our loving parent hears us and knows what is best for us.

I rediscovered a wonderful poem story that captures this truth. It is entitled Susanna, by Anne Porter

Nobody in the hospital
 Could tell the age
 Of the old woman who
 Was called Susanna

I knew she spoke some English
 And that she was an immigrant
 Out of a little country
 Trampled by armies

Because she had no visitors
 I would stop by to see her
 But she was always sleeping

All I could do
 Was to get out her comb
 And carefully untangle
 The tangles in her hair

One day I was beside her
 When she woke up
 Opening small dark eyes
 Of a surprising clearness

She looked at me and said
You want to know the truth?
I answered Yes

She said it's something that
My mother told me

There's not a single inch
Of our whole body
That the Lord does not love

She then went back to sleep.

"Susanna" by Anne Porter, from *Living Things: Collected Poems*. © Zoland Books, 2006. Reprinted with permission.

You are loved.
All of you, completely loved, by our fathering, mothering, parenting God,
There's not a single inch of our whole body that the Lord does not love.
so, ask with bold persistence,
God is listening.