

C Lectionary 17 7.28.19

Luke 11:1-13

Focus Statement: Jesus is calling us to him.

So I don't know if I'm super smart or if Jesus is, but here's the funny coincidence of my life right now. As I think most of you know, I do some freelance work writing Vacation Bible School curriculums for ELCA World Hunger. ELCA World Hunger is the service arm of our denomination, the ELCA, and it supports programs both in the US and around the world that create sustainable communities. Actually, let me just step away from the sermon for a sec here and toot our church's horn, because this is a pretty cool ministry we support. It's called ELCA World Hunger, but the focus isn't just on hunger, it's about actually changing the systems that perpetuate poverty. So they don't just provide food, they provide like, animals and seeds for farmers, training and education to help farmers farm more effectively, microloans for small businesses, school supplies and tuition for children, health care and preventative medicine, advocacy, and they do all this through local partners, people who know the community and what the real, on the ground needs and solutions are. The ELCA is known around the world as being one of the first groups on the ground when a disaster strikes and, maybe more importantly, the last to leave.

But, to the task at hand. So we just finished the Family Camp using the 2019 curriculum, which was based on the Parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke chapter ten, also known as the Gospel reading from last Sunday. And this week I turned in the manuscript for the 2020 curriculum, which is based on the Lord's Prayer, also known as the Gospel reading for this Sunday. I did not, when I came up with the theme for the 2020 VBS, realize that these

two readings came in line with each other like that, but I'm feeling pretty smart now that I do. 😊

I want to start with a little bit of teaching about the Lord's Prayer and what we're praying for when we say those familiar words. Last week we heard a lawyer summarize the law as "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." "You have given the right answer," Jesus responded. "Do this, and you will live." Love God and love your neighbor. As the Gospel of Matthew phrased it in its recounting of the event, "On these two commandments hang the law and all the prophets."

So now, just a few verses later, we find Jesus at prayer. Prayer holds a special role in Luke's Gospel, Jesus prayed before all the major turning points of his ministry. When one of his disciples noticed Jesus had finished his prayer, the disciple asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." Theologian Matthew Skinner wrote that he thinks the disciple wasn't asking for proper praying techniques, models or "best practices" for prayer, he was asking, Lord, "show us your heart," "tell us, what is it like to be in communion with God." This request for instruction on prayer, as Dr. Skinner reads it, was asking Jesus to teach them "what love looks like—love in action, love for God and neighbor." To which Jesus replied, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come." Opening by addressing God as father tells us this prayer is about relationship, a relationship we can depend on. We do not address the benevolent creator, Lord of the Universe, Alpha and the Omega, great shepherd of the sheep, or any other majestic, fancy, formal title, we address God who

is father, who is not just in relationship with us, but is family to us. This prayer is not the pleas of a serf to their overlord; it is the intimacy of a child to a parent.

And what is that prayer? Well, first, “hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.”

Hallowed, by the way, is just a fancy way of saying holy, set apart, marked for a purpose. So when we pray that God’s name be hallowed, that God’s kingdom come, what we’re praying for is for God to be God. And more than that, as Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, “It is true that God’s name is holy in itself... [that] God’s kingdom comes on its own... but we ask in this prayer that it may also become holy in and among us... that it may also come to us.”

We are asking, praying, that God might lead us, that God might make us more like God. We are asking that the one we call Father might be in relationship with us. As Luther might phrase it, it is true that God loves us, but we ask in this prayer that God might lead us to better love God.

Love God. That’s step one, that’s what it all comes down to, where it all starts. And what’s next? Love your neighbor. Let’s start with this request for daily bread. I started by talking about how ELCA World Hunger doesn’t just provide food, it provides all the things needed to make food possible. Luther describes this request for bread like that. Daily bread is “everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.” So, basically, everything. And that word “daily” is interesting too. It’s not a very common

Greek word, but it seems to mean something physical, something tangible, something we can touch. And the verb “give” is in the present tense, which in the Greek means it’s repetitive, it happens again and again. So what we are saying here is that every day, again and again, not just that God will give us what we need, but that we will recognize it, trust it, and receive it with thanksgiving.

The prayer goes on: “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” “For we ourselves forgive everyone” sounds more aspirational than accurate, but hey, aim high. Here’s your fun Greek fact for the day. The first forgive, “forgive us our sins,” that’s in what’s called the aorist tense. It’s used to describe an event that happens once with lasting effects. And the second, “as we ourselves forgive everyone,” that one is in the present tense. Which, as I mentioned earlier, describes an event that happens repeatedly. We forgive then, we can forgive, because we have been forgiven. Not again and again, like some sort of whiteboard that has to be continually wiped clean, and then gets that like gunky pen buildup on it after a while, but once for all time, forever. To continue with the bad whiteboard analogy, the forgiveness of God is like putting the cap on the pen, so now we can write our sins on the whiteboard all we want, but nothing shows up. We forgive, we can forgive, because that’s the kind of forgiveness we already have.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.” This one’s a bit of a tricky one, because one might ask, why would we need to ask God not to bring us to trial. Shouldn’t not bringing us to trial, or temptation, or sin, depending on your translation, shouldn’t that just be a thing God doesn’t do? Luther had a funny story he loved to use to describe this about a young monk

who “longed to rid himself of his evil thoughts.” An older, wiser, fellow monk said to him, “Dear brother, you cannot prevent the birds from flying over your head, but you can certainly keep them from building a nest in your hair.” The point being, trials, temptations, are a part of life. This prayer is about having the strength, the courage, and the perseverance to move forward despite the obstacles, to have confidence in the presence of God. Bread, forgiveness, perseverance: all things without which we cannot love our neighbor.

Love God, love your neighbor, it’s as simple as that. As Jesus told the lawyer back in chapter ten, “Do this and you will live.” Of course, as the lawyer’s immediate follow-up question and Mary and Martha’s confusing interaction displayed, put into any actual situation it immediately becomes not simple. So here then is the good news in the parables. First we have the parable of the friend going and waking another friend up in the middle of the night, asking for bread. The request is granted “because of his persistence”, says the translation we heard. But, one more Greek fun fact, this is probably better translated as “shamelessness.” Theologian Walter Liefeld describes it thusly, “the petitioner”—the one requesting bread so, in the context of the Lord’s prayer, us—“acts in shameless disregard of his neighbor (and perhaps of the other neighbors who will witness this midnight disturbance).” In other words, we humans can be needy and kind of demanding. But, Liefeld goes on, “the focus quickly shifts to the one in bed. Though the petitioner asks in a shameful way, his neighbor deals with the shame in a way that will bring honor to them both. Perhaps this is a better way to view what “hallowed be your name” means: God will act to honor Gods name even when we act in dishonorable ways.”

Moral of the story here, prayer isn't about asking God for what we need; it isn't about us at all. Writes Theologian Brian Peterson, "We are not the key that makes prayer "work." If we keep asking, seeking, knocking, it is only because God has done so first, and continues to do so."

I want to close by pointing out the picture on the front of your bulletin. It's a stylized version of that famous painting that is so often described as Jesus knocking on the door of your heart. The question being: will you receive Jesus into your heart, will you open the metaphorical door and let Jesus in? This always seemed a weird question. Jesus appeared behind locked doors to his disciples, he rose from the dead and found his way out of a tomb sealed with a stone, so why this garden gate is apparently such an obstacle I've never understood. So I wonder if maybe we have the question of this painting wrong. Maybe Jesus is not the weary traveler, beating on the door of our heart, begging for us to grant him hospitality. Maybe Jesus is the neighborhood instigator, knocking on the door of your life, inviting you to come out into the world where he already is.

This whole thing ends where talk about God always ends. God loves you. Right now, who you are, as you are. God is not knocking on the door of your heart begging for admission. Neither is God callously waiting for you to knock loud enough, beg persistently enough, pray well enough, for God to respond to your request. God loves you. And all of this, worship, scripture, prayer, even the law itself, all of this is all about letting you know this one simple fact. You are loved by God. It really is as simple as that. Amen.