

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

(Delivered on Sunday, July 24, 2016)

Introduction to the Text:

Prayer is at the heart of discipleship. Prayer is at the heart of our relationship with God. Our reading for today from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 11, verses one through thirteen as interpreted in The Inclusive Bible, lifts up God's nature of love and compassion. These verses assure us of God's readiness to hear and attend to our prayers and give us insight to how to pray and to seek God. As we pray, we come to know God more fully, and as we know God more fully we can pray confidently and with persistence.

Luke 11:1-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

One day Jesus was praying, and when he had finished, one of the disciples asked, "Rabbi, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say,

'Abba God,
hallowed be your Name!
May your reign come.
Give us today
Tomorrow's bread.
Forgive us our sins,
for we too forgive everyone who sins against us;
and don't let us be subjected to the Test."

Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, a neighbor, and you go to your neighbor at midnight and say, "Lend me three loaves of bread, because friends of mine on a journey have come to me, and I have nothing to set before them."

"Then your neighbor says, 'Leave me alone. The door is already locked and the children and I are in bed. I can't get up to look after your needs.' I tell you, though your neighbor will not get up to give you the bread out of friendship, your persistence will make your neighbor get up and give you as much as you need.

"That's why I tell you, keep asking and you'll receive; keep looking and you'll find; keep knocking and the door will be opened to you. For whoever asks, receives; whoever seeks, finds; whoever knocks, is admitted. What parents among you will give a snake to their child when the child asks for a fish, or a scorpion when the child asks for an egg? If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children good things, how much more will our heavenly Abba give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?"

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"I Pray You Pray"**

I will freely admit to you that there are some Sundays when I pour through the scriptures chosen for this week in the Revised Common Lectionary, and I will scratch my head and screw up my face and wonder what in the world God is thinking and where in the world God will take us with the passages unfolding before my eyes.

But then there are other Sundays, such as this one, where the choice is clear and the passage before us so rife with meaning and fecund with possibility that I just say, "thank you, thank you, thank you," and, "how much time do we have to explore?"

For in this text before us today, Jesus is teaching us many things that I feel are at the heart of the Christian life and can give us aid and succor every single day of our lives as we walk the walk and talk the talk of the Christ.

First and foremost, is our ever-present connection to and acknowledgment of God. As Jesus shows us often through his life and teachings, his Abba, our parent God wants to be intimately involved in every aspect of our lives. This is not an impersonal, unattached, soap opera God who only wants us to pray when we or someone we love are in deepest crisis, but an ever-present, ever-loving, ever-approachable God who desires relationship with us in every moment of our lives.

“Pray without ceasing,” Paul exhorts us in 1 Thessalonians 5; and the only way to do that is to pray with everything you are, embodying the Spirit of the Christ and letting your very life be a prayer to God as you confess, beseech, converse and above all, listen throughout every moment of this living gift you’ve been given.

Jesus speaks to this later in the text when he compares human parents to our Godly parent and the way in which we approach God with our requests, knowing that God will give all good things to God’s children who ask for that which is fulfilling, healthy and part of God’s loving kin-dom: “how much more will our heavenly Abba give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?” He says.

“There is an implicit – perhaps, explicit – ethic in divine parenting,” Dr. Bruce Epperly asserts in his commentary on the text before us today. ““God gives good gifts to God’s children!” Jesus asserts that even those “evil” [which we can read as} “imperfect” or “ambiguous, loving and sometimes impatient”] parents want what’s best for their children. Accordingly, won’t the perfect Parent, God, want to give [God’s children] even more?

“God seeks a world in which God’s will or vision be enacted on earth as it is in heaven,” he writes. “In other words, God wants the world to be defined by loving, welcoming, going the second mile, and accepting diverse spiritual habits. If God is loving, then our calling is to be as loving as God.”

And I can tell you from my own experience that the only way I can truly be as loving as God is to be in complete connection with God, asking for patience and insight, and ways to express kindness and love even when I’m feeling put out, put upon and put off.

“Jesus models prayer as an intimate conversation with God,” our UCC theologian Rev. Kate Matthews reminds us. “There are many references in the Gospel of Luke to Jesus at prayer, and I suspect that he listened just as much as he spoke. In any case, he tells the disciples — and that includes us, too — that we should talk with God as we would to a loving parent, a parent who listens to us, cares for us, forgives us, provides for us, protects us. Jesus doesn’t talk obscure, intellectual theology,” she writes. “He brings the reality of God’s love home to the people in terms they —we — can understand, the language of everyday relationships (at their best and not so best).”

I love that! The thing I have found in my own prayer life is that the more I approach God, the more approachable I find God to be. Of course, that is simply my own interpretation for I believe God has always been and will always be approachable and, indeed, is just waiting for each of us to approach, knowing that every good thing, every blessing, every answer is there if we but ask for it, seek for it and knock at the door for it, knowing it will be opened to us.

This part of our text today can be very difficult to accept, however, for who among us has not asked and felt like we were getting no answer; sought and felt like we saw no solution; knocked and felt left sitting on a not-so-welcome mat with bloodied knuckles in front of an unmovable door?

But ay, there’s the rub, my dear Hamlets. For while we may have our own ideas of what the answer should be, and what the solution most decidedly is and when, where and at exactly what time we need that door to open, God, as the all-knowing, all-loving, ever-wise parent, also knows exactly what we need and guides us into that place that is the best for us and will lead to the most growth for our souls, the spirits of our loved ones, and the greater good of God’s entire kin-dom.

This is our mother-father God who will never give us a snake when we've asked for a fish or a scorpion when we've asked for an egg, but will give us something so much more profound than fish and eggs if we have faith in the big picture and know that God is working in all and through all. "How much more will our heavenly Abba give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?"

"[Jesus is] not saying [here] you're always gonna get what you want," Father Richard Rohr writes in his essay on this text. "But if you establish this life of communion and trust between yourself and the divine, you will be a recipient of the Holy Spirit. You will be a conduit of grace and freedom and healing for the world, and in the end, that's all that really matters."

In our text today and throughout the gospels as we find Jesus in prayer so many times, I think Christ is giving us the absolute foundation for faithful living and a life filled with blessing upon blessing as we call upon God and permit prayer to be the very basis of our lives. For once we are steeped in prayer and realize our true and eternal connection to God we actually can know what to ask, where to seek and when to knock. And we can know that through our persistence in prayer, the peace that passes all understanding will guide our hearts and our minds.

"Spending time with God in prayer, in regular, intimate conversation, and opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit, will lead us on the way of compassion, and it will lead us to transformation, not just as individuals but as a community," Rev. Matthews writes. "Because this prayer [before us today] is the prayer of our community and not just a private one, it reminds us, challenges us, urges and inspires us as a community not only to form this prayer with our lips but to be formed ourselves by this prayer, formed and shaped into a community of compassion and justice that makes sure that all of God's children have "their daily bread" — and all that that implies today, all that they need from the abundance with which God has blessed us. [This] prayer calls us to join in the building of God's kingdom not up in heaven, but here, on earth, a reign of justice, healing, mercy, and love."

"How Shall I Pray?" by Ted Loder

How shall I pray?

Are tears prayers, Lord?

Are screams prayers,

or groans

or sighs

or curses?

Can trembling hands be lifted to you,

or clenched fists

or the cold sweat that trickles down my back

or the cramps that knot my stomach?

Will you accept my prayers, Lord,

my real prayers,

rooted in the muck and mud and rock of my life,

and not just my pretty, cut-flower, gracefully arranged

bouquet of words?

Will you accept me, Lord,
as I really am,
messed up mixture of glory and grime?

Lord, help me!
Help me to trust that you do accept me as I am,
that I may be done with self-condemnation
and self-pity,
and accept myself.

Help me to accept you as you are, Lord:
mysterious,
hidden,
strange,
unknowable;

and yet to trust
that your madness is wiser
than my timid, self-seeking sanities,
and that nothing you've ever done
has really been possible,

so I may dare to be a little mad, too.

Amen.