

Prayer: A relationship with a loving Father

Message for Sunday, February 18, 2018
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 11:1-13

Children's Message: Matthew 6:14-15

Oh wow, I've got something *great* to show you today! I have a bag full of garbage! It's some of my favourite stuff: used Kleenex tissues, broken glass, greasy rags, this jar of... *something* that was in the back of the fridge for months. I just love going through this; it brings back such happy memories. I like to spread it out on the floor—you know, like a decoration.

You don't seem impressed by my wonderful treasure. What's the problem? *I'll listen to their comments.*

What do you mean? Don't you keep your garbage? Actually, a lot of people *do*! I don't mean garbage like dirty rags. I mean garbage like, well, like this: You know this past week, we had some beautiful sunny days. I met someone on one of those days, and she said she felt "blah." I asked, "What's wrong?" She said that a couple of days before that, a friend called her a bad name. She's been holding on to that memory, carrying it around with her all the time, ever since then. Have you ever held on to your garbage like that? *Listen again for their responses.*

Let's think of a better way of handling that type of garbage. If you say, "That's OK, it doesn't matter," that's not true. What the person said hurt you; it *does* matter. So you can say something like, "That wasn't nice. How would you like it if someone called you names like that?"

Then you can forgive the person, and let it go. That's what Jesus tells us to do: forgive others, just as God forgives us. Just think how many times God has forgiven you for doing something bad.

Thanks to Harvey and Patsie Moore for this idea, in their book *The Mysterious Marvelous Snowflake*.

Message "Prayer: A relationship with a loving Father"

It was the monthly meeting of the church leaders in a certain town. They were discussing prayer. While they were talking, a telephone technician was working on the phone system on the other side of the room.

The United Church minister said, "I have found that kneeling is the best way to pray."

The Pentecostal pastor said, "No, I get the best results standing with my hands outstretched to heaven."

"You're both wrong," the Catholic priest said. "The most effective prayer position is lying down on the floor."

The technician couldn't keep quiet. "Hey, folks," he interrupted, "The best prayin' I ever did was when I was hangin' upside down from a telephone pole."

As a preacher, I am often asked to pray in public gatherings: to ask the blessing before a banquet, to dedicate a new building, to pray for someone who is ill. While I always delight in talking with God in prayer, I find even more delight when someone else does the praying. I'm paid to pray; that's part of my job. But when someone else prays, my heart leaps with joy: here is someone who prays because they love the Lord. I love it when other people pray!

Sometimes when I'm with some group or committee in the church, I quietly ask someone if they will pray when the meeting begins. Most people do this, but every now and then someone will say, "No, I can't pray." Sometimes it's just the same fear as speaking in public. But sometimes it's a literal, "I don't know how to pray."

So from now until the end of March, we are going to be in the "School of Prayer." We—and I mean *we*; I have a lot of growing here to do myself—are going to read and meditate on what the Bible says about prayer, and also learn from other Christians.

Eugene Peterson wrote this story in the introduction to his book about pastoral ministry.

She came to see me at the recommendation of a friend. She had been troubled for years, seeing

psychiatrists and not getting any better. The consultation had been arranged on the telephone so that when she walked into my study it was the first time we had ever met. Her opening statement was, “Well, I guess you want to know all about my sex life — that’s what they always want to know.” I answered, “If that is what you want to talk about I’ll listen. What I would really be interested in finding out about, though, is your prayer life.” She didn’t think I was serious, but I was. I was interested in the details of her prayer life for the same reason that her psychiatrists had been interested in the details of her sex life — to find out how she handled intimate relationships.¹

That’s today’s question: *How is your prayer life?*

The disciples had seen Jesus pray on many occasions. In the gospels, we read that Jesus had a prayer life which was clearly a priority for him. Sometimes they would awake stiffly in the middle of the night to find him missing from the weary band of men huddled around the remains of the campfire. He would be off somewhere by himself, praying.

Mark 1:35, New International Version:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Matthew 14:22-23, Contemporary English Version:

Jesus made his disciples get into a boat and start back across the lake. But he stayed until he had sent the crowds away. Then he went up on a mountain where he could be alone and pray. Later that evening, he was still there.

And sometimes, in the quiet of the night, they would overhear his prayer. His prayers were not the formal and elegant words they were so used to hearing from their religious leaders. Neither were they the mindless repetitions they heard coming from the pagan temples. They had the familiar warmth of a son speaking to his father.

The disciples craved for that type of intimacy with God, but they didn’t know how to obtain it.

Luke 11:1, New International Version:

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

That’s important, to learn how to pray. On the one hand, it’s perfectly natural. In every culture around the world, people have some form of prayer. On the other hand, we often have wrong ideas of what prayer is about. Like these two children...

Jeremy was just getting the idea of how this all worked, and asked the Almighty, “Dear God, please get me a pony. I never asked for anything before. You can look it up.”

Susan had mixed feelings about her prayers: “Dear God, thank you for the baby brother. I asked, however, for a puppy.”

So Jesus sat down and taught them how to pray.

Luke 11:2-4, New International Version:

“When you pray, say:

‘Father, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation.’ ”

[Note: this is not exactly the same as what we’ve learned as The Lord’s Prayer. The version in Matthew 6:9-13 is slightly different. Plus, the King James Version of the Bible contains the “for thine is the kingdom...” ending found in some ancient manuscripts. That’s the version most of us learned while growing up.]

How plain the simple the words are. How direct is the approach to God. There’s nothing fancy, nothing formal. We bring to God our hopes for the future as well as the hunger we have right now; we bring yesterday’s failures as well as tomorrow’s fears.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, p. 23-24.

Let's stop for a moment and think about what Jesus is teaching us here. God is like a loving father, who will not turn us away.

What does it mean to have a child-father relationship? Would you agree with me that there's more to being a father than just getting someone pregnant? There are a lot of fathers like that today, who take off after the deed is done. There are fathers who, while they live in the same home, aren't involved in the lives of their children. God is not like that.

You can have a relationship with God, like a Father. A relationship based on love, trust and respect—just like any healthy family.

Here's the point of today's message: prayer isn't something you do once in a while. Prayer is part of your relationship with God. Prayer has more to do with who you *are*. That's why people talk about a "prayer life."

Some people have a picture of God as someone with whom we have to plead and beg to get help. We pray for something, and then get impatient... just like any child. Remember, though, that like any good father, God thoughtfully considers our requests before answering them. He gives us only what is best for us.

Jesus told a story to illustrate what prayer is like.

Luke 11:5-8, New International Version:

"Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'

"Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

When we are desperate, we see ourselves in this story as the man with no food to give his unexpected company. In panic, we run to God, but find that we are left outside in the cold and dark deserted street. We knock on the door, but we get the impression that God is asleep and can't be

bothered. We knock harder and call out louder, and when God finally does answer the door, we get the feeling that he did it only begrudgingly.

Look at the parable again, this time more closely. The friend is outside pounding on the door. But who is on the inside?

Did you see it? Look again. Snuggled up next to that man are his children. Imagine how differently he would have responded if one of his own children woke up in the middle of the night saying, "I'm thirsty, Daddy." Would he roll over and go back to sleep? No. He would get up and get them what they needed.

We are not the frantic friend on the outside. We are beloved children, snuggled next to their father. If a neighbour can rouse him up in the middle of the night, then how much more can we count on our loving father to come to the aid of his children.

A man's daughter had asked the local pastor to come and pray with her father.

When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows. An empty chair sat beside his bed. The pastor assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit. "I guess you were expecting me, he said.

"No, who are you?" said the father.

The pastor told him his name and then remarked, "I saw the empty chair and I figured you knew I was going to show up,"

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man.

"Would you mind closing the door?" Puzzled, the pastor shut the door. "I have never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it went right over my head. I abandoned any attempt at prayer," the old man continued, "until one day four years ago, my best friend said to me, 'Johnny, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here is what I suggest. Sit down in a chair; place an empty chair in front of

you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because he promised, "I will be with you always." Then just speak to him in the same way you're doing with me right now.'

"So, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old man to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, and returned to the church.

Two nights later the daughter called to tell the pastor that her father had died that afternoon. "Did he die in peace?" he asked.

"Yes, when I left the house about two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me he loved me and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange about his death. Apparently, just before Dad died, he leaned over and rested his head on the chair beside the bed. What do you make of that?"

Next Steps:

- Try it! Try talking to God like a normal conversation.
- Be open and honest with God. If you're angry at God, say so! We tend to use polite language with other people; but with God you can say it straight.
- Be open to receive. Sense God's love for you, forgiveness for your sins, desire to be close to you. Be loved.