



Westminster Presbyterian Church

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July 28, 2019 Sermon

Lord, Teach Me How To Pray

Scripture: Luke 11:1-13, Psalm 138

When our children were little, we were stationed for several years at McConnell AFB in Wichita, KS. Shortly before Christmas of 96, Steve received orders to Elmendorf AFB, Anchorage, AK, for the following summer. Not telling our children at the time, it wasn't till years later that Jenna and Christopher realized, "Oh that is why we received all those winter clothes for Christmas!" The months flew by and soon the time for departure was upon us. Before leaving we decided to take a short trip to OK, our previous assignment, to visit friends in Norman before heading north. We knew we had travel challenges ahead of us when Christopher, then age 5, said at the gas station just down the hill from our house, "Are we there yet?" Steve and I looked at each other in disbelief. "No honey," I said. "We are just beginning the trip." Not to worry; all went well.

His question, however, got me thinking? It is roughly 178 miles by car from Wichita to Norman, one way. It would be over 3500 miles, including several days on a ferry, to travel by car from Wichita to Anchorage. Talking to a friend in Texas about our predicament and Christopher's comment, she suggested a behavior modification remedy using candy. We told the kids before leaving, mostly with Christopher in mind, if they could go 15 minutes without asking "Are we there yet?" or "How much further?" they could have a small piece of candy. After an hour, time increments were increased to half hour segments, followed by an hour. I am sure you are thinking, sugar overload, but I have to tell you it worked, along with a host of games, reading books, stopping periodically to visit various sights of interests and one movie video each day made possible with a small TV Steve mounted in the van. Remember this was before small electronic devices were common and easily available. After a couple days I do not recall the question coming up at all! Our journey to the last frontier was memorable and fun and the beginning of a great three-year adventure.

How much further? A frequent question asked by young travelers, but slightly adapted a phrase used by us all. How many hours left in the work day? How many days till we leave for vacation? How many weeks till the roof gets repaired? The familiar, how many shopping days till Christmas? Probing the heart deeper, how much longer will I be without work? How much longer will this pain, fatigue or nausea continue? How much longer will my loved one travel a harmful path? How much longer will loneliness engulf me, sadness last, or sorrow consume my days?

These are honest questions, beginning with the relatively unimportant and moving quickly to the deeply impactful. Each question reveals longing, and if one listens closely, sheds light on what is most powerfully missing for the asker of the question. But what if we could turn or flip this phrase and redirect the focus from longing experienced to that which longs to be given? What happens if we change the word longer to more?

Consider again our gospel reading. The disciples have asked Jesus, "Teach us how to pray." He answers with what we know as the Lord's Prayer followed by a story and a few questions which we

will consider in a moment. But first, jump down with me to the last sentence. Referencing parents who desire to give good gifts to their children, he said, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

How much more – thinking about this phrase, I remembered how our granddaughter, Evie, was introduced to the concept of asking for more through the use of sign language. Before she could speak her parents taught her to take her two little hands and put them together like this when she wanted more, thereby being able to express desire without fussing. Of course she did not know she was using sign language, but through this graced connection, potential frustration was many times easily circumvented.

Is there a correlation between a young child's asking and the more to which Jesus refers? I think there is. A child naturally turns to the ones that he/she trusts when they are hungry or frightened or wish to be comforted, and hopefully these needs are met. We similarly turn to others for love and affection, assurance and affirmation, but at some point realize that no one, not even those closest to us, can meet every need. We may not put our hands together like this, but the yearning for more is similar. Perhaps it is for more love, more peace, more comfort, more understanding or reassurance, more courage or sense of purpose, the list goes on. If our yearning is not named and understood, we may try to fill the ensuing void with other things, some helpful and some not.

The disciples had seen Jesus pray many times but somehow at this moment some of them realize that there is attractiveness about prayer, and they are moved to ask Jesus to teach them to pray. We can understand the draw to attractiveness, knowing what it is like to notice a quality or way of being in another person and desiring to be that way too. "Teach us to pray," writes one commentator "is about equivalent to "Show us your heart" or "Tell us – what is it like to be in communion with God?" It is a question that addresses the desire for more.

Jesus welcomes their request, but does not set out to offer a model or technique for prayer. He wants them to know what God's love is like, a love that provides and sustains, "give us this day our daily bread," forgives and heals, leads and protects, "and do not bring us to the time of trial," a love that never tires of our asking. He tells a story, possibly a well-known local anecdote, about someone waking up their neighbor in the dead of night needing a loaf of bread to feed an unexpected guest. The friend replies, "It is late and I have settled with my family for the night." Perhaps with a smile, Jesus says, "The man may not get up and give him food because he is his friend, but he will respond to his persistent asking."

Did the disciples quietly nod as they heard the story, beginning to see deeper meaning? Before a response can be made Jesus continues, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." There is attractiveness to prayer because God's love is ever welcoming and generous. God never tires of our asking or searching and God never holds back love.

We are the reticent ones often not aware of what we need or for what to ask. One way to identify the heart's longing is to practice a prayer known as the breath prayer. I engaged in this prayer again this week. It is not hard to do and requires only a small space of uncluttered time.

Imagine you are sitting in a favorite spot indoors or out. Jesus silently joins you. After a bit and using your name, he asks, "What is it you most want?" You think for a moment. There is no need

to rush. Slowly you identify what is most needed. Several things may come to mind. If so, take a few more moments and consider your list. See if one rises to the top. Next, identify the word that you most commonly use to address God in prayer. Maybe it is God, or Father, Lord, friend, Spirit. Take this name along with your need and put in in a simple phrase that can be uttered with the inhalation or exhalation of your breath. An example; "Let me know your rest, O God," or, "Lord, grant me peace."

You may choose to keep your prayer private or share it with others. A gentle example of persistent prayer, the breath prayer has a way of opening the heart and spirit, creating room to receive blessing and providing a means for tension or worry to be released.

Shortened further, the prayer might be tried with the previous example of sign language. Putting my fingers and hands together, I can say "more rest," or even let the words drop away all together and let the silence convey my prayer. The more to which Jesus refers is gently experienced as the breath prayer is repeated again and again.

It might be a worry that prayer focused on personal need, and offered repetitively, will encourage self-centeredness but in fact the opposite occurs. Praying again and again for rest, the person praying begins to notice others who need rest; the person desiring peace becomes aware of others whose spirits are restless. Teresa of Avila, wrote, "Prayer is not just spending time with God...If it ends there, it is fruitless. No, prayer is dynamic. Authentic prayer changes us—unmasks us." Prayer invites, even compels our reaching out in love.

In a moment we will partake in the sharing of Holy Communion, where the how much more of God's love is most fully seen. As you eat the bread and drink the cup, give thanks for God's ever present love and care for you and for all creation, and know that God through Christ, hears, provides, forgives, and protects. We in turn are called to share this generous love with one another. Amen.

