

Sermon on Luke 11:1-13, also Genesis 18:20-32 and Colossians 2:6-19 [Psalm 138], Tim Cooper

Increase and multiply on us your mercy; that with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal. Amen.

Good morning, I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak to you today.

Have you noticed in reading or listening to the Bible, that Jesus answers the real question, and that Jesus answers the real prayer? That Jesus answers the prayer of our hearts?

Do you ever have the experience, when reading, of having to back up several times to try to better understand some point, only to remain a little confused, and then find out that if you had just read on a little farther things were made clear down below? Sometimes things in the Scriptures can seem a bit confusing at first—like two weeks ago when a lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”, and Jesus began telling him about a traveler who got into trouble. One thing to try in these cases is to “Read a little more, listen a little longer, follow a little farther”

Actually, the Gospel lesson today doesn’t start out that way, in fact it seems really clear when the disciples ask Our Lord to teach them to pray and he immediately teaches them the Our Father. But the lesson in our bulletins doesn’t stop there. We read a little more, listen a little longer, follow a little farther, and discover a treasure.

Let’s recognize ourselves in the story. Those who asked Jesus to teach them to pray have been following Jesus. We’re here this morning, we are following him also. Two chapters ago they were miraculously fed by Jesus at the feeding of the 5000. We’ll be miraculously fed by Jesus in Holy Communion. A few weeks ago Phyllis and other members of our parish told us about their joyful experience on mission trips. One chapter ago, the seventy returned with joy from the mission trips Jesus sent them on. They listened when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, and so did we, two

weeks ago. And last week, when Ophelia and Mary showed us how not to be distracted, by focusing on the most important thing, the disciples learned this too, as evidenced this week in their taking a cue from Mary by staying with Jesus as he prays and then asking him to teach them. So these disciples [the congregation] want to know the same thing.

When we think of the Gospel, or the Good News, many of us naturally think of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”. And it is very right that we should think of this, so, so important. And this passage today is also good news, culminating in Luke 11:13: “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!” (and if you were following along in your bulletin, you saw that there was an exclamation point at the end of the lesson—marking the treasure). So this is Jesus answering the real question, the real prayer. And like the daily bread that we ask for, we want the Holy Spirit to live in our hearts each day, praying when we don’t know how, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “interceding with sighs too deep for words”

Now there are a lot of good teachers, some very good ones here today. And our very best Teacher doesn’t begin with the 13th verse. Jesus begins by teaching us to start out addressing our loving parent. And we are to recognize that God’s name is holy, it is “separated”, it is different than every other name. And we want God’s kingdom to come—that kingdom where everyone loves their neighbor as themselves (no killing, no stealing, a place, as Isaiah tells us, where the lamb and the wolf and the lion and the calf can lie down together in peace). God’s kingdom is wherever God is king—Thy kingdom come, in me and in you.

We ask for bread for the day.

We ask for forgiveness. In the gospels we see Jesus forgiving sins. In the parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus warns that we need to forgive others if we want forgiveness. And he tells the story of one who was forgiven a huge debt that could not have been paid off in a lifetime, but then refuses to forgive a minor debt owed to him. Maybe you remember what happened to that guy. That story is a very powerful incentive for us to forgive others, aware of the mountain of our own shortcomings. Can we forgive others the way God forgives us? The psalmist sings in Psalm 103: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us” Can we forgive like that? As if the wrong done never even happened? And you may know the next verse in that psalm: “As a father cares for his children, so does the Lord...” I know for myself that that kind of forgiveness would be a tall order. The story from Matthew helps. But Our Lord knows the real answer. Verse 13 of today’s lesson, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And he teaches us to ask that we not be brought into the time of trial.

After teaching this prayer that we will all be praying in just a bit, Jesus paints this wonderful picture of you, all comfortable in your bed at night. You’re safe with your loved ones, when an unwanted surprise shocks you into getting up just because of the boldness and persistence of your friend, who has come banging on your door. Now I know many of you and my family and I have cause to know that you are very kind, and maybe you are kind enough to get out of that bed joyfully, but he says that even if you’re not, you’ll help anyway—maybe just so you can get back to bed. And of course the message is that your heavenly parent, whose ways are higher than our ways, is not too busy or too comfortable to help you—be bold. Remember the image of the prodigal, just a few chapters in Luke beyond today’s reading, “...while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” Our heavenly Father is not comfortable in the bed until all his children are home. He’s waiting up for us. Waiting for that knock. That is who we are praying to.

Now we come to one of the reasons the Bible is such a great comfort, a promise from Our Lord: Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Now let me just pause here and say, wait a minute. What about Abraham? He is trying to get to understand God, and is asking him questions—in fact, he is interceding for his nephew Lot, and his family, who live in Sodom. And, pretty boldly working his way down from 50 people, he gets God to commit to not destroy the city if ten righteous people are found there. I think Abraham figures that there have to be at least ten including Lot. But that isn't the case. The city is not spared. But what was Abraham's real prayer? Maybe "Lord, save my nephew." Which God does.

Ok, Ok, but let's consider Jesus' friends from last week, Martha and Mary. Now I want to talk about them and what I have to say is really heavy, but first just a very brief aside: Remember the "classic evaluation" of Martha and Mary that Ophelia referred to last week (Mary=Good, Martha=Bad) [she was not endorsing that simplistic view]. Well, I have aunts, sisters, named Mary, the older and Martha, the younger, and my Aunt Martha was well aware, as all Martha's should be, of John chapter 11 verse 5 which reads, "Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha, and her sister..." I wonder how old she was when she discovered that verse. But back to the point—Jesus did not come to Bethany in time to keep Lazarus from dying, even though the sisters sent him a message, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." In the book of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were not kept out of the fiery furnace, and Daniel ended up in the lions' den. But Jesus stood with the three young men in the fiery furnace, the angel shut the lions' mouths, and Martha and Mary got their brother back from the dead and in their patience and trust gave to us all this tremendous gift: the image we need to hold on to when we think it is too late, that God has finally let us down—because he hasn't, and he didn't [let them down][the words in square brackets were not shared in the actual sermon, but just for clarity this is the "heavy" part

referred to earlier—a reason for faith in the midst of heartbreaking grief—Jesus loves Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and us too—and he loved us back then, and his friends were strong enough to hang on because they knew him. Jesus wept].

Jesus asks us to consider what a parent does when asked, by their child, for a fish, or an egg. The parent doesn't give them something that will hurt them. Lori and I were at the Philadelphia Museum of Art a few weeks ago, and we saw "Prometheus Bound" and those of us who remember Greek Mythology know the view that it conveys of deities who do not desire unity with humanity. But Our Lord is telling us that Our Father in heaven is immeasurably more loving than the best earthly parent. Maybe you remember the image from the Phillies game several years ago where the mom and dad and their two little girls are in the stands and the dad catches a foul ball. He hands it to one of his daughters and she promptly turns around and throws it back onto the field. The reactions of the mom and dad are priceless, and the little girl gets wrapped up in a huge hug. And God is better than that.

That brings us to the 13th verse, and the promise of the Holy Spirit as a gift from the Father to those who ask him. That's us, right? That is Our Lord's answer to how to pray, to how to develop a relationship with God.

And that is the end of the gospel reading for today, but it isn't the end of the Gospel. Remember, Jesus answers the real question, the real prayer, the one on the disciple's hearts, that is, the one on our hearts. What is that real prayer? What is your real prayer? What are the prayers of the Holy Spirit in us? What kind of prayer is expressed in sighs too deep for words? Some questions are better grasped by looking at the answer. Read just a little more of the Bible, listen just a little longer to the Evangelist, follow just a little farther towards Jerusalem.

Jesus answers the prayer of our hearts by his actions. Ophelia told us last week where Jesus was headed during this part of Luke's gospel. He's going to make sure the prayer he just taught us to pray

gets answered. I wouldn't be able to figure it out, but God gave St. Paul the Holy Spirit, too, and in the letter to the Colossians that Linda [at 8]/Phyllis [at 9:30] read, Paul explains to us "God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross." Jesus, our friend, taught us how to pray, and then Jesus, the Christ, answered that very prayer. Every part. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins.

Do we want to follow a little farther? He made sure we don't have to do that alone. Heavenly Father, fill our hearts with your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name. Amen.

[the psalm for today, Psalm 138, was not mentioned in the text above, but verse 4 reads "When I called, you answered me, you increased my strength within me" "Fort" in the name Holy Comforter is about strength]