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Lord, Teach Us to Pray Luke 11:1-13

Welcome to the start of a new year at Chapel Hill! Twenty-nine years ago this weekend I preached my first sermon in Memorial Chapel, and I know that your generosity in allowing me to recharge each summer is one of the reasons I've thrived here for three decades. Thank you!

Of course, you benefit as well, because you have the opportunity to hear from our incredible team of preaching pastors. Have any of you ever been in a church where the associate pastors' sermons were... excruciating? Then you know what I'm talking about. And if you haven't, then you have no idea how blessed we are to have such a deep bench of great communicators. Last week someone told me, "You weren't missed!" So thanks to my colleagues for their good work on our Fearless Q series. It was superb.

This has been a summer of firsts for the Toones. The biggest "first" was that we sold our home of 28 years. Cyndi and I have been talking a lot about what it would be like to live smaller, to live more simply, to be able to use less and give more. And in April, I felt the Lord's prompting to put our place on the market. Sixteen days later, it was sold! In a sometimes traumatic process of downsizing, we sold all but 10 pieces of furniture and moved from a 3200 square foot, 5-bedroom home to a one-bedroom apartment. Don't feel sorry for us; our new home is wonderful! But it has been quite a change. It's the first time Cyndi and I have ever moved and ever lived anywhere else.

It was also the first summer in six years that both our kids were with us. Rachel slept in a closet, Cooper on a mat in the living room, and it was a great summer of conversations and pinochle and stepping around each other. It was the first time that Cooper had a full-time job, commuting every day to Kitsap Bank in Bremerton. It was the first time that Rachel preached a sermon in her home church. And to wrap up this summer of firsts, it was the first time a member of my family beat me in a round of golf. Any guess who? Cyndi! My wife kicked my hind end last weekend; she was awesome. Of course, I'm never playing golf with her again, so I hope she enjoyed it!

This morning as I tell this story, I want you to watch for one more "first;" the first and only time this occurs in any of the gospels. See if you can spot it.

¹Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."
²And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.
³Give us each day our daily bread, ⁴and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation."

⁵And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; ⁷and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? ⁸I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs.

⁹And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹²or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If 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!"

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Did you spot the "first" in the story? Jesus was in prayer and the disciples were with him... watching, listening in. And when he finished praying, one of them—we aren't told who—says something that as far as we know, had never been said before. It was a first. In fact, this is the only place in all four gospels where one of the disciples is recorded as speaking these words. Ready? "Lord, teach us..." Nowhere else, before or after, does a disciple ask Jesus to teach them something. When you think of the incredible things Jesus did, it is even more remarkable. They could have said, "Lord, teach us how to walk on water" or "Lord, teach us how to cast out evil spirits" or "Lord, teach us how to multiply fish and loaves" or how to turn water into wine or how to heal a paralytic or how to calm a storm or how to raise the dead!

But that's not what this disciple asks. The first and only time we read of such a request is "Lord, teach us to pray!" And it wasn't even a request. It is in the imperative mood in the Greek. The imperative is a command! "Come here!" "Sit down!" "Stop that!" That's the imperative. How gutsy is that? The disciple doesn't say, "would you please teach us?" He is much bolder than that. Not disrespectful, I don't think, but urgent. It's more of a pleading, "Lord Jesus, we have watched you pray as long as we have known you. We see that you have a relationship with God that we don't have. We see how God answers your prayers. We see the power in

your life. We want that. We need that! Lord, you must teach us to pray!" It was a desperate cry for help from a disciple that wanted and needed more.

This last spring, I cried out that prayer to the Lord. "Lord, teach us to pray. Teach me to pray!" Because the truth is, my prayer life stinks or at least, it did at the time. It has been a battle my entire life. I begin to feel guilty for my prayerlessness, or I get in trouble... I cry out to the Lord, I remain diligent for a while and then, I get busy or distracted or indifferent or self-sufficient and my prayer life sags. Then I become desperate again, and the cycle starts all over.

But last spring, as I was thinking about our disciple-making mission—as I was thinking about the hundreds of people not yet in LifeGroups, not yet studying the word, not yet walking in accountability with brothers and sisters, and as I was thinking of the thousands of people around us do not know Jesus and who will spend an eternity in hell if we don't care enough for them to share the good news of salvation—I was overwhelmed with the realization that without the Lord's help, we cannot possibly fulfill our mission as a church. We cannot do it. We will continue, as Rachel said in her sermon, to just dabble around the edges of life.

Even more, I realized I want more in my own spiritual life. More than obedience, more than duty... I want a deeper relationship with the Lord that isn't compartmentalized into chunks in the day or on a Sunday morning but that is woven in and out of every part of my life. So I and our whole leadership team, we decided that our next step forward in our mission to present everyone mature in Christ is to cry out to Jesus the way that this disciple did. "Lord, teach us to pray!"

So that's what we are going to do. This year, in a variety of ways, we are going to entreat the Lord's help in our prayer life. Tell me, is there anyone here this morning who would join me in admitting that your prayer life is not what you want it to be? I spent the summer learning and practicing some new things, and I am eager to share this journey with you. We all are. "Lord, teach us to pray."

So, how did Jesus respond to this "order" from his disciple? Well, he teaches them what to pray, how to pray it and what to expect. He starts by saying, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name." Do you recognize those words? We call them The Lord's Prayer. Tim Keller, in his book, *Prayer*, makes this claim: "The Lord's Prayer may be the single set of words spoken more often than any other in the history of the world." Even unchurched folks know these familiar phrases.

But did you notice anything unusual about the prayer I recited? It's different, isn't it? That's because we normally pray the version found in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6. In fact, that is the version we will be studying for the coming weeks, but I wanted to start with Luke's version for two reasons. First, this is the only place where the disciple says, "Lord, teach us to pray." I think that is powerful. Second, it reminds us of something very important about this prayer and all prayer:

The Lord's Prayer was never intended to be just a memorized string of phrases. If it was, wouldn't you expect the words to be exactly the same in Matthew and Luke? But they are not.

This prayer is intended to be an outline. Jesus didn't mean for us to just rumble through a set of words mindlessly; rather, each phrase teaches us something about God or about ourselves or about how we are to engage with God's mission in his world. Over the next weeks, we are going to let Jesus teach us how to pray using the Lord's Prayer as our outline. Why do we say "our" instead of "my?" How dare we call God "Father" when no Jew of the time would ever have done so? What does that weird word "hallowed" mean anyway? And more....

Jesus teaches us what to pray. Then he tells us how to pray, and he does so with a funny and surprising parable. He asks his disciples to imagine they are pounding on a neighbor's door in the middle of the night to borrow some bread to feed a friend who showed up unexpectedly. There were no 7/11's in those days. The only way to get food in the middle of the night was to borrow it from a neighbor. So how warm is the welcome he receives? Not very! 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything.' But the neighbor just keeps pounding on the door until he gets what he wants.

How many of you have seen *The Big Bang Theory* on TV? It's about a brilliant but obsessive/compulsive physicist named Sheldon who has an irritating way of announcing himself. (Knock, knock, knock) "God!" (Knock, knock, knock) "God!" (Knock, knock, knock) "God!" Remarkably, this is how Jesus tells us to pray. In fact, did you notice the word he uses to describe the "Sheldon" neighbor in his parable? Impudent! That is not a nice word. It means "rude" or "excessively bold." If you have a translation that says "persistence," it's only trying to water down the meaning of the original Greek word. Jesus is bragging on Sheldon for pounding on Penny's door!

A friend in my LifeGroup admitted the other day that he is uncomfortable asking God for anything. He feels like God has a lot on his plate... that he has better things to attend to than his little requests. But Jesus says, "Ask! Seek! Knock!" Any of you remember the Bob Dylan song, "Knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door." He's just quoting Jesus. God wants his children to ask and seek and knock. He invites us to be bold, to be impudent, in laying our requests before him.

And the last thing this passage teaches is what to expect. Jesus asks his disciples to imagine what kind of a father would slip a poisonous snake into his son's lunchbox. Or a scorpion into a child's Easter basket. Monstrous, right? Well, Jesus says, "If you who are evil (Wow... harsh verdict!) 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.

This is important. Jesus tells us to go ahead and ask for the things we want. Go ahead and ask for your daily bread and the other necessities of life. God is pleased to give those things. But here is the most important thing that God is teaching me about prayer: it is not primarily about God filling my laundry list of demands. God is most interested in giving me Himself! The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is God present in and with us. Prayer is not just us sitting on Santa's lap, asking for our Christmas goodies, prayer is sitting in our Daddy's lap, leaning into Him, listening to the sound of his heartbeat and enjoying his presence.

When was the last time you prayed, not because you felt guilty or because you wanted something, but just because you wanted to spend time with your Heavenly Father. If never, or a long time, it's one of the most important things we will learn together in this coming year.

So, how's your prayer life? Did you pray yesterday? Last week? One Whitworth professor says that a Christian that doesn't pray is like swimming on a couch. The metaphor doesn't even make sense. To be Christian is to pray. And yet I'll bet there are many here this morning who feel like they are swimming on their couch. Don't you want more from your spiritual life?

As with so many things in life, it starts with a decision. Keller in his book asked us to imagine that we had a terminal illness and a pill that would keep it in check. As long as we take that pill every day without fail, we will live. But if we miss even one day of our medicine, it could be fatal. He asks the question, "How diligent would you be in taking that pill?" Not because you ought to take it but because you can't survive without it. That is the new way we must think of prayer. We have a terminal illness of spiritual death looming over us, and we fill our lives with other things to help us cope with that death, but there's one simple practice that would help us keep that terminal illness in check: prayer. Prayer gives life because it connects us to the Giver of life."

But we prayer-less Christians have lots of excuses. We don't have time... and yet we can read the paper in the morning and watch three hours of TV at night. We forget... and yet we manage to remember other important things every day. We get bored... and yet we manage to do daily workouts even though they become tedious.

So enough of the excuses. You could decide right now, "I am going to pray every day." Something that has helped for me is this: when I first wake up, before I lift my head from the pillow, I welcome the Lord into my morning. And when I turn off the light, the last thing I do is thank God for my day. You could write a reminder to yourself and put it on top of your alarm clock. You could decide right now that you will at least start and finish your day with prayer. I urge you—I challenge you—be done with the excuses, unless you really think that you don't need God's help in life. Let's get started.

And here is a wonderful tool. It is a Prayer Journal. Each day provides a scriptural prayer reflection and a place for notes. And each week we provide a LifeGroup guide based upon that week's text. I urge you, pick this up at the Ministry Fair. And LifeGroup leaders, whatever else you are doing, could I ask you to consider coming together with us in this journey to deeper prayer.

If we do not pray, if we will not pray we will never become the people or the church that God is calling us to be. It is a matter of life!