

## “Teach Us to Pray”

### Year C, Proper 12 – Luke 11:1-13

*A restatement of and reflection on C.S. Lewis' essay, "Work and Prayer," 1945  
preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, July 24, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

It seems like every time I have the opportunity to gather with my fellow clergy, I end up with some new insight, something I hadn't thought of before, at least some little tidbit of ministry or point of Scripture. Like the off-hand comment from Fr. Pat Connell, my counterpart over at Trinity Church, Owensboro last winter about how much the people of St. Paul's love our beautiful home that ended up being the starting point for last year's Annual Report.

This past Thursday was another such gathering of the Four-Rivers Clericus, the clergy from the western part of the Diocese, and once again, I was not disappointed. Actually, I got a head start this time as Fr. Connell came here to ride down to Hopkinsville with Dcn. Larry and me. Fr. Pat is – now, how should I say this – he is somewhat less comfortable with unfilled driving silence than our deacon, or even *myself*, for pity's sake. The hour-long ride to Hop'town was basically uneventful, but practically buzzing with tidbits of ministry and even points of Scripture. But this time, rather than the Rector of Trinity, what caught my attention was a seemingly off-hand comment from our dear Deacon.

We were talking about the Diocesan School of Ministry, and in particular the process toward diaconal ordination, and deacons preaching or (and I still find this incredible) deacons *not* preaching. Eventually, we turned to last week's sermon, and the readings for this morning, when Dcn. Courtney commented that though he left it out of his sermon, in his study, he had wondered at Luke's narrative taking a break from Jesus teaching his disciples and the crowds for Jesus to talk to his friends Mary and Martha about choosing the *better* part. “Hmm,” I thought, and said aloud, “there's something to think about in three years when the story rolls around again.”

And then I got to thinking some more about it while thinking about this morning's readings. And then I thought about it while doing work in the garage down in Clarksville. And then I thought about it sitting on the lawn mower in way too much heat. And then I thought about it while listening to a series of essays from C.S. Lewis about prayer. Because here we are in this week's lesson, and the young Rabbi is back on the move with his face set toward the city that kills the prophets. And he's back in rabbi mode again, teaching with both question and answer, *and* story-telling. The question the disciples ask is pretty straightforward. They don't ask about the value or necessity of prayer. The world in which they lived pretty much took it for granted that prayer was a given. The pagan world around them is famous for having had a god for this, and a god for that. But even among good God-fearing *Jews*, it was just *understood* that part of *being* a faithful Jew was communication with the One that Jesus over and over again called Father. Having returned from the great ministry adventures we saw a few weeks ago, and having seen the power that Jesus was able to bring to bear, the disciples weren't asking if they *should* pray, they were asking *how* to pray. They wanted Jesus to teach *them* how to give their own prayer real power, how to make their prayers really *count*.

This time, however, Jesus is not only answering a question from his disciples, but he's answering one of the biggest questions that gets asked in our post-just-about-everything world. Because in the busy-ness of our world that, as our Deacon pointed out last week, makes the busy-ness of Martha mere child's play, too often the world is asking why we should bother with prayer at all.

Now, I suppose that anytime we are talking about prayer, we need to be honest is saying that there are really *two* kinds of prayer. At its ultimate, perhaps, prayer is simple communion with God, asking nothing, yielding fully to his perfect will – for us, for those we love, in fact for the whole world. I

have known people, not many, mind you, and I call them *saints*, but I have known people whose wills were so in tune with the will of God, that I think their prayers asked only, “Thy will be done.”

But Jesus here seems to be addressing head on the *other* kind of prayer. Perhaps you noticed as it was being read, that here in Luke’s shorter version, Jesus doesn’t even *use* that caveat for the Father’s will. Or perhaps you only noticed it when I mentioned it just now. From the follow-up story in the Rabbi’s teaching a well, it is clear that he is addressing a *second* kind of prayer, one that brings before our Father the needs and the desires of our hearts and lives, our longing that things could be, even *should* be different. Unfortunately, we have seen the power of such prayer trivialized so much, seeking aid with finding a parking spot, or divine help for our favorite sports team, or asking for chocolate pudding for supper, that we are tempted to discount prayers of petition altogether. But if this morning’s Gospel lesson tells us anything, it is that we should not we *dare* not give up that easily. It might be a good thing if a little boy never asked his mother for chocolate pudding with his supper because he was so high-minded and spiritual that he didn’t *want* any. But there’s nothing good at all about a little boy who doesn’t ask for chocolate pudding because he has learned that it is no use in asking.

And so goes the argument against prayer presented in our world. The objection is not so much that our prayers so often fall short of the will-yielding prayer of the saints, but that prayer itself simply has no effect at all. “If God is really God,” some would say, “why in the world would he need to hear from *us*.” If God is all-wise, after all, he *must* already know what is best for us, he must already *know* everything we need, he must already *know* everything we even want? And if God is all-good, wouldn’t he do what’s best for us whether we ask for it or not?

The problem is that such an argument against prayer is that it is at its heart an argument against doing *anything* at all. Within the limits of the space and time in which we live, every action, just like every prayer we pray, everything we do, is trying to bring about a desired result. So if the all-wise, all-good God is going to do what I best for us one way or the other, why do *anything*? “Why carry an umbrella,” I might as well say, “if God doesn’t want me to get wet, it won’t rain on me.” Why bother washing my hands? Why bother constraining my diet? Why bother weeding the garden? To be sure, most of what goes on in the universe is out of my control. Some days, most of what goes on in my day-to-day life, is out of my control. But not *everything* is out of my control. While another weed will likely crop up in my garden tomorrow, (and the next day, and the next day, sigh) the weed that I pull up today will *not* be there tomorrow. And I *can* keep the rain from soaking my head by opening my umbrella. We may not understand why he has done so, but within the limits of space and time, the God of Creation has allowed that my actions *do* make a difference. If I don’t wash my hands, I stand a very good chance of getting sick. And *with* these hands I can either lift up the fallen, or soothe the suffering, or bind up the broken. Or with these hands I can oppress, *or* I can wound, or, as we know far too well from all the news reports over the last month or so, I can murder, and murder, and murder. It is in my power, and in yours, and yours, and yours, to waste the resources of space and time that we have been given. Or it is in our power to use those gifts for the building of God’s Kingdom, here and now.

And in exactly the *same* way, the Father to whom I offer my prayers has somehow allowed that my prayers make a difference as well. What Jesus is teaching his disciples, *and* us, here as he teaches us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” is that prayer *does* matter. And just to make sure we get the point, Jesus punctuates his model prayer with the story of a man who simply will not give up asking his neighbor for help, and the example of the good gifts of a loving father. The difference is that, unlike the creaturely work of our hands, the prayers of our hearts are *not* bound by space and time.

I have a lot more to say about that, not to mention the part about forgiveness, or the part about how to live through our times of trial, but all that will have to wait for another time. Our Deacon got me thinking so much that I ran out of time to write it all down. For now, we need to remember, that far from being weaker than physical action, our prayers have the awesome power to change *everything*, or the awesome power to change just *one* thing, that, at least for a moment of time and space, fills the universe with the love of God.

After all, I have a friend whose life just yesterday was filled with grace by chocolate pudding for supper.