

With Upturned Faces (Luke 11:1-13)

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The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost (Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15 (16-19))

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/with-upturned-faces

In the walking around life Jesus led, one of his disciples blurted out, *“Master, teach us to pray!”* So, he did. They asked him about something that was self-evident. He was a man of prayer. He didn’t make a show of going to the 50-yard line with a ruling of the Supreme Court in his pocket, he just prayed quietly and regularly.

Prayer isn’t a message scribbled on a note, jammed into a bottle, and tossed into the sea in hopes it will wash up someday on God’s shoreline. Prayer is communication with God. We speak to God and God touches, embraces, shapes and changes us. Whether we pray for rain or pray for sunshine, our prayers are answered, because in the act of praying, we receive the gift we really seek ... intimacy with God.

Read Luke 11:1-13 (NRSV)

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” So, he said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Don’t bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So, I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to 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. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion? 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!”

“Lord, teach us to pray!” a disciple asked. No matter how fast or how slow we run in our hectic lives, we often find ourselves desperately in need of God so we can tap into the divine power for the needs of the day.

The disciples could see Jesus had a strong connection with God through prayer. No matter how busy he became, he made time for the needs of the spirit. The gospels tell us often of the times Jesus took time away from the pressing needs that constantly tugged at him so he could be with God.

Before it ever began, Jesus broke away and spent 40 days and nights of prayer and testing in the desert. He knew the days ahead would be a test in and of themselves so he submitted himself to the boot camp experience with the Tester. It was a fierce and lonely time, but it was necessary for rigors of the ministry and the calling he had come to live.

Later, when the needs of people around him became too much to bear, he occasionally broke away to refuel his soul. He would simply leave the disciples and the neediness that wanted to take everything he had and he spent time in prayer so he had the strength to go on.

Even on the eve of his suffering, Jesus led the disciples to the garden where he spent time anguishing over the hours ahead.

Jesus understood this clearly: No one can live the demands of the spirit without taking time to stand before God soaking in the presence of God alone. If it was true for Jesus, wouldn't it be true for us even more? The disciples recognized this but it's an amazingly simple exercise that most of us attempt to leave out preferring spiritual activity over the quietness of the soul in fellowship with God alone.

Most of us struggle with prayer. It sounds simple, but it's not. The writer Ann Lamott wrote recently these lines in her defense of prayer: "Prayer means talking to God, or to the great universal spirit ... Prayer connects us umbilically to a spirit both outside and within us, who hears and answers." Ever the comic, she adds, "(Maybe) it's like the comedian Flip Wilson saying, 'I'm gonna pray now; anyone want anything?'"¹

When Nelson Mandela traveled to Oslo to receive the Nobel Prize for Peace, he stopped off in Boston first where he was welcomed at Harvard University in a special chapel service just for him. When he arrived, it was packed with both the curious and the committed. There were the hard-boiled professors and the edgy activists crowded into the Memorial Church to hear this little man of courage.

Remember at the time Mandela had not been fully released from the old system of white-rule drawn from the old paradigm of Dutch colonialism. The brutalism of the past had been relentless and oppressive and Mandela represented the shifting of the winds of change toward racial equity.

The room literally dripped with anticipation and the crowd seemed eager to embrace his call for change. It was if an Old Testament prophet had found an audience ready to embrace the

¹ Ann Lamott, Facebook post, 7/11/22

social and spiritual changes that meant God was wiping away the injustices of the past so a new order could emerge.

When introduced, the audience at first exploded, then quieted down to a hush. Mandela stepped to the massive pulpit of that great chapel and in a quiet, hushed voice said to the people: *"I'm going to tell you what you need most to hear, the single most important thing you can do for South Africa ... pray,"* he said softly. *"Pray for my people. Pray for us and with us daily. Pray. That's what you can do. That will change the world."*²

We can work ourselves down to the nub and it will eventually collapse upon the weight of itself unless we're connected with God through prayer.

If you drive west from here out onto the central plains of Kansas, you'll soon find yourself immersed in a sea of sunflowers. In their full glory, they're stunning to the senses. On your trip out onto the Great Plains, be sure to leave early in the morning because the sunflowers awaken at dawn and turn their faces to the east to greet the morning sun. All day long the sunflower demonstrates a physical characteristic known as *heliotropism*, a trait whereby they methodically crane their necks so they face the sun all through the day until the end of the day when the sun settles for the darkness of night facing the opposite direction from where they started.

What we can learn is that it's important we mirror their behavior. We can start the day anticipating the rising sun and pointing ourselves in that direction knowing that the appearance of God is sure and certain. In the act of prayer, we turn our faces early in the day to greet the God who has set the world in motion and is continually shining the love and favor of God upon the earth.

During the day, it is ours to stay fixed in God's direction so we can be attuned to whatever God might want to accomplish in the world and to be ready to play our part as God's partners. The attention we give God goes all the way to the end of another day completed by the attention we give God and the sense of companionship we feel with God's presence.

We turn our faces to God in our thoughts and our attitudes and God will shine the love and grace upon us all day long. There is a goodness in that kind of living. There is a grace that accompanies us in all our endeavors and we shine for God.

The life of prayer is the turning of our attention to face the shining love and care of God, knowing that when we do, God is glorified in our living.

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² Peter J. Gomes, *Sundays at Harvard: Sermons for the Academic Year*, Cambridge MA, 1995