

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

July 24, 2022 (Proper 12, Year C)  
Luke 11:1-13

A mother sent her fifth-grade boy up to bed. In a few minutes she went to make sure that he was getting in bed. When she stuck her head into his room, she saw that he was kneeling beside his bed in prayer. Pausing to listen to his prayers, she heard her son praying over and over again. "Let it be TOKYO! PLEASE DEAR GOD, let it be TOKYO!"

When he finished his prayers, she asked him, "What did you mean, 'Let it be Tokyo'?"

"Oh," the boy said with embarrassment, "we had our geography exam today and I was praying that God would make Tokyo the capital of France."

"What do you pray FOR?" "HOW do you pray?" "WHY pray at ALL?" "Is there a special FORMULA, or certain LANGUAGE that should be used?" There are a LOT of questions, and JUST as many MISUNDERSTANDINGS, about HOW we pray, and WHY.

We Americans DO pray. According to a Gallop Poll, 87% of all Americans pray, 50% use prayer for petitions, and 70% claim their prayers are answered. Although sometimes we're not COMFORTABLE praying in public, it's clear that Americans DO PRAY.

But, do we know HOW to pray? When we pray, are we just speaking to OURSELVES, or are we speaking to GOD?

There's a funny exchange in Elizabeth Gilbert's book Eat, Pray, Love. She tries to learn to mediate, which is LIKE prayer. She writes:

The conversations between me and my mind during meditation generally go something like this:

Me: OK, we're going to mediate now. Let's draw our attention to our breath and focus on the mantra.

Mind: I can help you out with this you know!

Me: OK, good, because I need your help. Let's go.

Mind: I can help think of nice meditative images. Like – hey, here's a good one. Imagine you are a temple on an island! And the island is in the ocean!

Me: Oh, that *is* a nice image.

Mind: Thanks. I thought of it myself....You know what? Forget the ocean.... Here's a better idea – imagine you're an island in a LAKE, instead.

Me: Can we meditate now, please?

Mind: Yes! Definitely! But try NOT to picture that the lake is covered with...what are those things called –

Me: Jet Skis?

Mind: Yes! Jet Skis! Those things consume so much fuel! They're really a menace to the environment. Do you know what else uses a lot of fuel? Leaf blowers. You wouldn't think so, but –

Me: ...Stop! Please stop! YOU'RE MAKING ME CRAZY!!!

Mind (wounded): Sorry. I was only trying to help....Are you mad at me now?

It's FUNNY, but only because it's so TRUE. I once spoke with a man in the hospital who was STRUGGLING with his prayer life. He knew he needed Jesus. He knew he couldn't MAKE it through that experience WITHOUT Jesus. But when he prayed, it didn't come out right. He'd be talking to God, and TELLING God about his worries and concerns, and the next thing he knew, he was just THINKING about those things. He found himself WORRYING about his health, worrying about how

this was affecting his wife and his family, worrying about how he was going to pay for his treatment. Then he'd catch himself and he'd think, "Hey, what are you doing? You're talking to GOD, REMEMBER!? You're supposed to be PRAYING!" He'd start talking with God again, but, after awhile, his thoughts would DRIFT OFF again. He felt terribly guilty about it. He felt like his prayer wasn't GOOD enough.

I have that problem too. My mind wanders all the time when I pray. It's a pretty COMMON PROBLEM – MORE than we want to admit. When I talk with people about prayer, they say they can't find the right WORDS when they pray. Their prayer just doesn't come out the way they WANT it to. It doesn't SOUND right, or they don't know what to SAY, or where to BEGIN.

Well, if you feel a little INADEQUATE in knowing how prayer WORKS, and exactly HOW to pray, then take heart – you're in good company. The DISCIPLES THEMSELVES felt the SAME way. Our gospel says, "Jesus was praying in a certain place and when he finished, they said to him, 'Lord, TEACH us to pray.'" In reply, Christ gives them the ideal prayer, the perfect prayer, his OWN prayer, right from his OWN lips, the LORD'S Prayer.

If you don't know where to begin, begin where JESUS does. He says, "When you pray, say: FATHER."

It LITERALLY STARTS there. That word "Father" sets the tone for EVERYTHING else in the prayer. It's not about the PETITIONS; the prayer is about our RELATIONSHIP with GOD.

I remember a discussion with some high school kids. One of the boys had recently lost a sister in a car accident. Some in this group confessed that they had THOUGHT about going over and visiting after the accident, but they didn't know what to DO or what they should SAY. But, ONE of the friends DIDN'T let his fears keep him away. He'd spent most of that day WITH his friend. He admitted that HE didn't know what to do or say EITHER. Their GRIEVING friend said that what was most IMPORTANT to him was just somebody BEING there WITH him. He THANKED the one who had visited. Even though he couldn't DO anything or SAY anything that would CHANGE the tragedy, his PRESENCE was a big help and greatly appreciated.

I think that in many ways, that's what PRAYER is like. It's a RELATIONSHIP. It's the PRESENCE of a friend or a father or a mother, NOT always saying or doing things to CHANGE the situation, but their presence can change YOU, as it brings THEIR comfort and love to the moment – and MAYBE, with their SUPPORT, you're more able to ACCEPT what lies ahead, TOGETHER.

Prayer is the PRESENCE of God – not that God will always CHANGE the situation, but knowing that God is WITH you, that God is going THROUGH the tragedy, or suffering, or depression, or even death, WITH you – not as a FAR OFF God, but as your VERY CLOSE and LOVING FATHER. "When you PRAY," Jesus says, "say Father."

Some ask, "Does God ANSWER prayer?" Jesus said, "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened...The heavenly Father (will) give the HOLY SPIRIT to those who ask him!"

This is God's GIFT to you. God gives you HIMSELF. He gives you his PRESENCE in the Holy Spirit.

Now, He may not be the ANSWER you were LOOKING for, but He's EVERYTHING you NEED. He's the answer to EVERY prayer. He may not change your circumstances, but then again, he MIGHT. Either way, prayer is the assurance that God is IN, AROUND and GREATER than any challenge; that, COME WHAT MAY, we BELONG to HIM, and he's HOLDING us in his arms.

God HEARS your prayers because God LOVES you. And every prayer BEGINS and ENDS with THAT FACT. It begins with us SEEKING God, and it ALWAYS ends with JESUS.

We say, "Lord, teach us how to pray," and, through his Spirit, he STILL IS. He teaches us what REALLY MATTERS.

We say, "God, where are you?"

And God answers, "Jesus."

"God, do you care? "

God answers, "Jesus."

“God, can you help me? “

God answers, “Jesus.”

“Lord, give me strength.”

God answers, “Jesus.”

“Lord, give me peace.”

God answers, “Jesus.”

“Lord, forgive me.”

God answers, “Jesus.”

This is the Lord’s PERFECT prayer, and it’s his GIFT to you. It begins and ends with love, and its NAME is JESUS. He was the FIRST gift of CHRISTMAS. He’s the PERFECT gift of Christmas. And the ONLY gift that REALLY MATTERS.

And that’s WHY we say, even in JULY, MERRY CHRISTMAS! I hope you like your gift. Amen.