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Luke 11:1-13
Genesis 18:20-32
Psalm 138
Colossians 2:6-15

July 28, 2019
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

What's the one word that stands out to you in our Gospel reading this morning? I hope you answer "prayer" (because that's what this sermon is all about). And, let me say this up front...if we are going to talk about prayer this morning, I don't want us to talk about miracles. I don't want to talk about prayer in a way that says...I prayed and God gave me everything I wanted. He did the impossible!

As I was preparing my sermon, I actually googled the phrase, "Why I Pray." I wasn't surprised when article upon article came up about miracles... all of those great answered prayers with happy endings. Although those types of stories are true and wonderful, for me, those kinds of articles seem to send the message that God will answer your prayers if you just pray hard enough. Keep trying, they say, God will answer in God's own time. Even if you get a no, it's actually God giving you a yes to something better. We've all heard these kinds of things.

And, I wonder...why do we perpetuate those kinds of stereotypes about prayer? The stereotypes that make us believe that if prayer isn't answered in the way that we hoped for then we must be doing something wrong. That's not to say miracles don't happen or that our prayers are never answered. Because of course, good things do happen as a result of prayer. But, I have seen far too often that when prayers aren't answered or the miracle doesn't happen that people lose their faith in God altogether. Why bother, they wonder? Clearly, I am not good enough in God's eyes to deserve an answer. Or, they argue that God isn't the "good" and "loving" God they keep hearing about because God couldn't do the one thing they needed and longed for. I am sure you know people who have felt that way. Maybe you, yourself, have found yourself struggling with these same issues.

After all, didn't Jesus say, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." That sounds pretty straightforward. But then you say...Well, I've been asking. I've been searching. I've been knocking. And guess what...no answer!

And when that happens it would be tempting to fall into another cliché...the one that says maybe you are just asking for the wrong things. I've heard that one before and I can tell you it's not helpful.

It's not helpful because of course we are supposed to pray. We are supposed to call out to God in times of need, in times of gratitude, in times of praise. And, I am here to tell you that there is nothing more powerful than falling on your knees when you have nothing left and putting it all in God's hands.

So, I want us to wrestle with this issue...how should we pray and what should we expect?

I'm going to give you two answers...the text book answer and my answer. First the text book answer...

From our Gospel in Luke, we are first told that Jesus, himself, was praying. And, we are told that the disciples were there with him. They noticed his prayer and wanted to learn how to pray like Jesus did. Jesus gives them three guidelines for prayer...relationship, sustenance, safety.

First, we are to seek relationship with God through prayer. God bring your kingdom to us. Your Kingdom come. Be with us. Come and in dwell our lives, our communities, our families. Be in relationship with us. We don't just want things from you, we want to know you. That's relationship.

Second, we are to trust that we will be provided for when we pray. Give us today our daily bread. Notice it doesn't say give me my daily bread, but give us our bread. Give us, all of us, what we need today. The prayer for sustenance, for provision, is a very present and communal request. It's a desire that everyone will have what they need. That's sustenance.

Finally, we are to ask for safety, for protection. Forgive us our sins. Keep us from trial and temptation. Protect us from what we will do wrong. Help us to be strong and to choose what is right and good. And in doing so, we commit to doing the same for others. We will forgive and support and uplift the people in our lives. That's safety.

That was Jesus' lesson. These are his guidelines. Jesus' prayer is a prayer of intimacy and of trust, of belonging and vulnerability. Qualities that we need to not only know and love one another, but to know and love God.

That's the text book answer. But, let's be honest...trying to describe to you the importance of prayer is like describing to you how to love someone. You can't. You can't just read about or hear about it. You have to experience it. You have to take the risk and be vulnerable and try.

So, here is my answer...and I'm going to let my Baptist roots come through for a moment...

Just pray. Lay it all out for God and say, God, I can't do this on my own. Give over whatever it is that burdens you, whatever it is that holds you down, whatever it is that hurts. Give it to God. And then, just be. Be in relationship with God.

Here's the key, in my mind...all of the guidelines, all of the step by step instructions on how to pray will feel empty if you aren't open to being in a relationship with God. Prayer draws you in. It creates a partnership between you and God, a reliance on the strength, the courage, the hope, the perseverance to get through what life may have dealt you. It's a partnership of praise and thanksgiving for the times of goodness and mercy and abundance. It's a partnership of support and encouragement to work for the betterment of God's creation.

That's the relationship of prayer. And folks, I will tell you this...from the time I was 8 years old and walked down the aisle of Second Baptist Church in Belton, SC to give my life to God, I have felt carried. I felt carried down the aisle that day and I have felt carried ever since. My partnership with God began that day at Second Baptist. And I am here to tell you...I have laid my life out for God so many times since then.

It has been scary at times. It has been extremely humbling. It has been sustaining. When I was at my lowest, I prayed. When I was at my weakest, I prayed. When I thought I couldn't get through another day, I prayed.

Did I always get the answers I wanted? No, I didn't. Was life at times too hard to bear? Yes, it was. But it was my relationship with God that kept me going. It was my partnership with God that carried me.

There is a lovely poem by one of my favorite poets, Jan Richardson, that states the power of prayer this way...

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.
But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.
I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.
I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength...

Here's what I want you to do this morning...I want you to put away the text book explanations. Stop second guessing if prayer matters. Stop struggling with whether or not you are worthy or if God even hears your needs. I know it may be scary. I know you may doubt. I know you may have been hurt before when you felt that prayer didn't work. But, try again. My prayer for you is that you allow God to carry you in all of God's strength and in all of God's comfort and in all of God's love. Let that be your prayer, too. Amen.