

Larry goes to a charismatic Pentecostal church and listens to the pastor's fiery sermon.

After a while, the pastor asks anyone with prayer needs to come forward to the front at the altar. Larry gets in line, and when it's his turn, the pastor asks: "Larry, what do you want me to pray about for you?"

Larry replies: "Pastor, I need you to pray for my hearing." The pastor puts his hands over Larry's ears, and he prays and prays and prays.

After several minutes, the pastor removes his hands, stands back and asks Larry: "Larry, how's your hearing now?"

Larry says, "I don't know, Pastor. It's not until next Wednesday."

Prayer. That's the topic of today's sermon as we continue our sermon series on the Parables of Jesus. Parables. Secular stories told for a spiritual, for a holy truth.

Our sermon text this morning is taken from the gospel according to Luke 11:1-13.

1 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."

2 *So he said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come.*

3 *Give us each day our daily bread.*

4 *And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”*

5 *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,*

6 *for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’*

7 *And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’*

8 *I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his [friend’s] persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.*

9 *“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.

10 *For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*

11 *Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish?*

12 *Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion?*

13 *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!”*

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

Pray with me, please. God, we're here this morning because you called us here, and because we need to be here. During this sermon this morning, we ask you to teach us how to pray. Amen.

Today's scripture text easily fits into three distinct parts. In the first section, we have a prototype for prayer.

In verse two, Jesus said to his disciples, *“When you pray, say: Father, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come.*

Do you remember Janis Joplin's song *Mercedes Benz*? *Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz? My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends*

Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends. So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

Do you know anyone who prays like that?

Have you ever prayed like that. I'm sorry to say that I have, where prayer is nothing more than give me give me give me

Betty's body was wracked with cancer.

And, each day I visited her, when I prepared to leave, I asked her what she'd like me to pray for. And each day, she said I should pray for healing. And, so each day, I did.

But, after a couple of weeks of this, I went in one morning and, after I'd visited with Betty and was preparing to leave,

I asked her, "Betty, what would you like for me to pray for today?"

And, with tears flowing down her sunken cheeks, she said, "Jeff, today, I want for you to pray that I'll be close to God."

“I still would like to be healed. But, God knows that already. More important than that, though, I want to be close to God.”

To be close to God. That’s really what prayer is all about. It’s about being close to God. You know, that’s what we’re asking for when we pray God’s kingdom come. We’re asking God’s presence to be as real here as it is in Heaven.

When we pray as Jesus taught us to pray, we ally our desires with those of God, matching up our desires with God’s desires. And, we open up our lives to participate in God’s work

But, Christian prayer doesn’t come naturally. And, in the place where we ought to learn how to pray, I’ve heard doozies.

I read about one this week another pastor wrote about. It went something like this: *Dear God, thank you for all those who’re here today. Please bring us back tonight for our ice cream social at 3:00 PM in the parking lot, but, in case of rain, take us to the fellowship hall. In Jesus name, Amen.*

To pray the words from the Lord’s prayer, “May Your kingdom

come,” is to invite God to have God’s way in our lives.

It’s inviting God to clean house and take up residence within us. To pray “MayYour kingdom come” is to recognize that our ways, and the ways of this world, are not God’s ways.

Allow me please to take a quick detour.

We all know we need to pray. But, is there anyone here this morning who’ll confess you don’t pray as much as you think you should?

I so appreciated how candid one pastor was in writing about her own prayer life. She wrote:

I am a failure at prayer. When people ask me about my prayer life, I feel like a bulimic must feel when people ask about her favorite dish. My mind starts scrambling for ways to hide my problem.

I start talking about other things I do that I hope will make me sound like a godly person. I try to say admiring things about prayer so there can be no doubt about how important I think it is.

*I ask the other person to tell me about her prayer life, hoping she will not notice that I have changed the subject. (Barbara Brown Taylor, *An**

Altar in the World).

But, I think that pastor might be being too hard on herself. I think she's thinking just of prayers with words. But, there are other types of prayers, aren't there? There are many, I think. But, I'll mention just one.

What about those who put feet on prayers. Doesn't that count?

I'm thinking of those who don't just pray for the hungry, but they actually feed the hungry?

Doesn't that count? Not just talking to God about something, but doing something about it.

Or, what about those who don't just pray for the lonely, but they reach out to the lonely.

And, those who don't just pray for the sick, but who minister to the sick?

You see what I'm saying? Yes, using words is one way to pray. But, there are other ways, I think—such as putting feet on our prayers.

In the second part of our sermon text is the parable of a persistent prayer. I'm going to read verses five through eight again.

- 5 *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,*
- 6 *for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’*
- 7 *And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’*
- 8 *I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his [friend’s] persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.*

Understanding the culture of the biblical world is always important.

Here’s no exception.

In this parable, few would have raised eyebrows about a friend arriving at midnight unannounced in a world without cell phones.

And, during hot times of year, a person might well decide to travel in the cool of the evening.

The sun would cause the sand to sear your sandals. So, they often traveled at night to get out of the sun.

The friend shows up at midnight. And, it was a sacred obligation to take them in in that place where there was not a Holiday Inn or an AirBnB. So, they didn't have anyplace to stay unless you let them in. We, of course, can't imagine a world like that.

And, there was no place to eat. You couldn't go down to QT or Waffle House or some such place to grab a bite to eat. You've been traveling. You're tired. You're hungry.

In that world, it was a sacred responsibility to take folks in, and to give them something to eat. But, this friend of this traveling friend doesn't have anything to eat.

So, he goes to a neighbor. Can't you just see it? A knock at your door at midnight.

No one, of course, likes that.

The neighbor's request, though, even at midnight, is not unusual.

Nor is the neighbor's reluctance to get up.

This Palestinian peasant and his whole family likely slept in one bedroom, along with their small farm animals. The chickens and such.

The door was locked with a heavy metal bolt and padlock. It was pitch dark.

And, the knock on the door probably awakened everyone in the house, including the chickens. So, helping the neighbor asking for bread was no simple task.

What is striking is why the man will help his neighbor in response to his request.

Let's look again at verse eight, Jesus says "*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.*"

As to the word persistence, several Bible scholars contend, and I agree, that a better translation of the Greek word there, *anaideia* would be shamelessness.

Shamelessness, or perhaps even chutzpah or moxie. Because of his shamelessness, his chutzpah, his moxie, he will get up and give him

whatever he needs.

Of course, as a parable, this is not just a story about getting food from a neighbor for a surprise guest. No, it's about much more than that.

It's about the nature of our prayers to God.

It teaches us that, if a reluctant neighbor can be badgered into helping us, how much more eagerly will God hear our prayers? And, with God, there is no midnight. God is not a God who wants us to go away, but a God who's moved by our persistence, our shamelessness, our chutzpah, our moxie.

Today's parable, I think, invites us to trust, to believe that at the bottom of the river of reality, there is nothing but God's goodness, even in the face of all of the hurt and wickedness in our world.

“As a youth pastor, I've heard the knock on the door at midnight.

A trembling and tear-soaked teenager who thinks she might be pregnant. And, asking me to pray with her as she tries to figure out what to do.

And, I've sat in the living room of a family and listened as a teenage

girl, crying and wailing uncontrollably, told me about being raped by an uncle beginning when she was in first grade. Now, she was pregnant as a result. And, she asks me to pray with her as she tries to decide what she ought to do.

And, I've sat in my office and talked with a couple struggling with what to do after learning the baby they'd hoped to have in just a few weeks has developmental issues, which will allow him to live just months, if that. But, his short life will be filled with pain.

And, they ask me, and they cry out to God, to pray with them as they try to decide what they should do.

Those have been some of the most difficult experiences I've had as a pastor as I searched desperately for the words to say and pray.

And, as I've talked and prayed with those folks, facing the most difficult times of their lives, I've been careful not to offer easy and glib answers to their earthshattering problems.

Each time I've prayed with folks facing those sorts of questions, I've assured them, just as I assure you this morning,

That at the bottom of the river of reality, there is nothing but God's goodness, and they, and you, can trust that God's response to your prayers will come from the heart of a heavenly parent who loves you more and better than you love yourselves.

And one who knows, in the profoundest sense of the word, what's best for us.

Finally, in the third part of today's scripture is the promise to the persistent pray-er. Listen again to verse 9. Jesus says, "*So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.*"

Many have misinterpreted this scripture in such a way that God operates like a snack or a Coke machine. But, no. No. No. Prayer is not just about praying for our knee replacement surgery. No, it's about bringing God's kingdom, God's reign, into reality.

And, it's also about forgiving those who've wronged us, those who've gotten under our skin.

Prayer is not just when I spill my guts to God. No, prayer is when I

obey Jesus and pray for the things God teaches me to pray for.

Prayer is bending my feelings and thoughts and desires toward what God wants for me to feel desire and think.

Learning to pray as Jesus taught us to pray transforms our prayers from “give me, give me, give me” to “make me, make me, make me.”

When we pray as Jesus taught us to pray, what we ask and seek is the same as what God wants: again to bring God’s reign to reality and the forgiveness of our sins and the forgiveness of others.

A little boy was out in the backyard with his Daddy. They talked about this and then that.

And then the little said to his Daddy, “I have a question for you, Daddy.”

“What is it son?” his Daddy asked. “I’ll answer it the best I know how.”

“How big is God?” the little boy asked his Daddy. Just then, a large plane way up in the sky flew over.

“God is as big as that plane,” the boy’s Daddy said.

“But it’s tiny,” the little boy said. “Surely God is bigger than that.”
The two talked on for a while. Then, the boy’s Daddy asked if he’d like to go run some errands with him.

They went by the grocery store to pick up a few things, to the bank to deposit some checks, and then they headed home.

On their way home, they passed by the airport. And, the Daddy had an idea. He circled back around to the airport looking for a plane on the runway. Finally, he saw a couple big huge planes. The Daddy said to his son, “That’s the plane you saw in the sky a couple hours ago.”

“How could that be?” the little boy asked. “It’s so much bigger here than it was in the sky.”

“It always is,” said his Daddy.

That’s the way with all of us, isn’t it?

And, that’s the take home message for you this morning. The closer you are to someone or something, the bigger it is in person.

So it is with God. The closer you are to God, the bigger part God plays in your life. God is bigger because God is closer.

So, like Betty, may our prayers be, “God, I want to be closer to you.”

Life can work you all over before it’s all done. And, we’re all carrying our own sack of disappointments and what-might-have-beens.

So, it’s in our closeness to God that makes all of the difference. The one who holds the world together is the same one who’ll hold you together in your deepest despair and your darkest moments.

THIS IS THE GOSPEL.

THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS.

AND, IT’ S TRUE.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

AMEN.