

Psalm 139:1-18
Luke 11:1, 5-13

First Presbyterian, Pasadena
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TACO AND A PRAYER
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A few stories from this past week. Some were up here as early as 4:30 Wednesday morning. Others arrived at 5, more at 5:30, and still more around 6 a.m. The early arrivers made scrambled eggs while others added cheese and potatoes. Then these were rolled into tortillas and wrapped in tin foil. Other volunteers put two breakfast tacos in paper bags that also had printed schedules of the activities of this church. One hundred bags were prepared. With the church's electronic sign along with street signs advertising that there were free breakfast tacos available for anyone driving through, but especially for students, teachers, and staff at Memorial High School during this exam week, volunteers stood outside to welcome anyone who came through. The volunteers would ask if they would like to have a prayer as well. Virtually everyone said yes, they needed that this morning. Some of the prayers went something like this: "Lord, we thank you for this new day. Be with these persons as they go through the day. Feed their minds and hearts as well as their bodies, and keep them safe. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." All 100 bags were either given away or delivered to persons in need. The Mission and Outreach Committee is to be commended for its creative, thoughtful, and organized effort to reach out to this community in this way.

From Wednesday evening through Friday evening dozens of folks gathered in the fellowship hall to sort and organize all the items that had been donated for yesterday's church garage sale, most of the proceeds from which will go towards youth

ministry, in general, and this summer's trip to Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico, in particular. Some of the prayers that were offered were that this church would continue to show the hospitality of Jesus Christ to any and all who might enter our doors. I must confess that, as some of us drove a rented truck to pick up items too large for automobiles, other prayers were uttered, often under our breath. Pianos were transported, large china hutches were picked up, file cabinets and yard tools and tables were delivered -- all graciously donated for this particular cause.

This past Friday was National Day of Prayer. I, along with other clergy and some community leaders, gathered at Crenshaw Park where prayers were offered by and for public servants at every level; the military and veterans; the police, firefighters, and first responders to emergencies; those involved in the fields of the arts, entertainment, and media; those in business; children, families, and marriages; educators and students at all levels; those involved in the various aspects of health care; volunteer and civic organizations; racial reconciliation, and the church.

"Lord, teach us to pray." Isn't that a curious request by Jesus' disciples? Are not many, if not most, of the Psalms prayers? Aren't they what some call "the prayerbook of the Bible"? Jesus responds to the disciples' request by offering them what we know as the Lord's Prayer. But today it is the nature of prayer itself that we look at.

That may seem strange to some because we pray all the time, don't we? We pray before meals, we pray before bedtime, some pray upon waking up. In emergencies we pray. When driving in traffic we pray. We pray at athletic events. We pray before exams. We pray before surgery. We pray after surgery. We pray before job interviews. We pray after job interviews. And yet, how do we pray? What do we expect? Has prayer

become a kind of formality to which little thought is given. Or has prayer become simply a way of telling God what we want and what we think we need as if God were some kind of person whose only purpose is to hear and respond to our prayers.

What's fascinating are Jesus' words after he gives his disciples this model prayer. "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.'" Or, he gives another example: "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?"

Does not the friend lend his neighbor the bread because of their friendship? And does not the parent respond to the child because of their relationship? The Eastern Orthodox archbishop and theologian, Anthony Bloom, has written, "We want something *from* Him, not *Him* at all. Is that a relationship? Do we behave in that way with our friends? Do we aim at what friendship can *give* us or is it the friend whom we love? Is this true with regard to the Lord?" (***Beginning to Pray***, p. 29). So writes Anthony Bloom.

In writing about the Scottish minister, writer, and theologian, George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis noted that MacDonald "reports that he never, as boy or man, asked [his father] for anything without getting what he asked." Lewis then observed, "Doubtless this tells us as much about the son's character as his father's..." (Preface to ***George MacDonald: An Anthology***, p. xxii). I suspect that it was that devotion of son to father and father to son that came first in their relationship that kept both from being tempted to abuse that relationship. So it is with our relationship with God.

Whether our prayer is one of praise and adoration or of confession or of thanksgiving or intercession, it is our devotion to God and God's to us that always comes first and enables us to approach God in the first place. In another church in another time, someone asked me if I thought it appropriate for her neighbor to pray to God asking for a new bed. When our prayer overshadows our understanding of our relationship with God, then I would say it may not be appropriate. On the other hand, there are moments of desperation, are there not, when our hopes and prayers in a certain situation are not at all inconsistent with our devotion to God. For example, when we pray for healing for a friend or loved one or even for ourselves, that may not at all be inconsistent with our love for and devotion to God. The healing may or may not happen as we wish, but then, in the end, we always understand that our prayers are subservient to and dependent on the grace, mercy, and providence of God.

Just as the psalmist prayed openly and honestly, sometimes in surprising ways, expressing hope and joy as well as contempt and anger, gratitude and compassion as well as fear and frustration, so also are we invited and encouraged to be open and honest in our prayers to God, but we remember *always* that it is our relationship to God that is paramount -- in the same way that it is our relationship to parents, grandparents, spouse, children, and friends that is paramount. We would never want to use, or abuse, that relationship simply to get what we want.

The original title of this sermon was "The Uselessness of Prayer". A friend of mine used that term "uselessness" in a series of sermons about the faith. The point is that neither the Christian faith nor prayer is a tool or an instrument to achieve something or to get something done or to get something we want. In that sense, prayer is useless.

That's not why we pray. Rather, the purpose of prayer is to be in relationship with the Creator, the God who loves us, the God who became human in order to show God's faithfulness, the God who welcomes us and forgives us in the same way that that parent welcomed home and forgave that foolish child.

When I hear someone say, "Prayer works", I tend to cringe a little bit. It works to the extent that it is a reflection of our relationship with God and God's with us. It does not work in the sense that because of our prayers things will get better -- whatever the situation might be.

Our God is not like that. Our God cannot be manipulated like that. God wants to be in relationship with you and me, and that is foremost. Therefore, anything we share in that prayer, whether it's adoration, confession, thanksgiving, or intercession, must be understood in that context and is always offered knowing that our words and requests are preliminary and tentative, and that God always has the final word. As one person has said about a parent's relationship with a child, "You always have your say, but you don't always get your way."

We are a praying people because we know we belong to a God who created us and who loves us. That's why we pray, and that's why we can pray for health and sound mind as we distribute tacos, as we pray for our community, nation, the world, and the church, as we pray for a spirit of hospitality and grace as we try to raise funds for youth ministry. "Lord, teach us to pray." Indeed, that is our daily prayer.

Thanks be to God!