

HOSEA 8:1-12 or GENESIS 18:20-32

PSALM 85 or PSALM 138

COLOSSIANS 2:6-15, (16-19)

LUKE 11:1-13

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 24, 2022; Year C

### *Prayer!*

**Prayer! Now if I were a certain kind of pastor and preacher of a certain kind of church today, crafting this sermon would be easy, a proverbial piece of cake, a snap, because it would simply be a matter of preaching a homiletical “how to!” I would leave the pulpit and walk around without my robe and proceed to tell you exactly what to say and how to say it when you engage your prayer life. I would then promise you that if you were to carefully and artfully, passionately and zealously, follow the basic formula once prescribed by Jesus as a result of a direct request from his disciples, that everything you ask for would magically, miraculously, become manifest, made real, in your life. I would then strongly implore you to find your inner “prayer warrior,” with all that goes with that very masculine image, all designed to defeat the devil and protect you from all ills, no matter what threatens to befall you. Not! After all, it is Jesus who was quoted as saying similar things when it comes to our prayer life, as he gave an off the cuff lesson to his inquisitive disciples who asked about the nature of prayer. Frankly, I have no other choice for myself than to strongly suggest, truly believing, that either Jesus was egregiously misquoted or taken way out of context with these grandiose promises, or that these words were indeed altogether manufactured by the agenda-oriented Christians who went about the business of forming and framing the emerging and evolving theology of the early Church. This is a not-so-subtle reminder that this literary phenomenon of putting words in Jesus’ mouth was once a frequently employed tactic**

popular among early church adherents trying to get a foothold. This manipulative occurrence just happens to be the case with most of the words attributed to Jesus as they were composed and recorded as Gospel narratives, probably somewhere approximately around ninety percent of them added with editorial biased license. **Today's Witness from the Gospels in Luke is a lection that makes Jesus' analysis of a faithful prayer life come off like the granting of wishes by Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, or a Genie, or all these mythical figures combined. And if by chance our prayers are offered in the hope of securing some favorable weather, we could then add the Groundhog of February to our fantasy list!**

**The problem we all face as people of faith, all persons of faith, including our own Christian version, any tradition whose constituency pray in whatever way or mode they choose, is that there seems to be a great disconnect, a serious dichotomy, between our asking and God's answering, our actions and God's reactions, our verbal offerings and God's responses. Apparently, there is a great gulf fixed, a chasm way too wide to build a bridge. So just what do we do? What do we pray? How do we pray? And perhaps most importantly, what do we really and truly, authentically and genuinely, if we are honest with ourselves, one another and with God, expect from our prayers? It is my presupposition that our personal and corporate integrity, and to a lesser but no less important degree our theological sanity, is at stake, all of it clearly hanging in the balance, as we navigate the complexities of a subject that is always shrouded as and/or in eternal mystery wrapped in much enigma.**

I will never forget during the early days of the Southern Baptist Holy War, a takeover of seismic proportions, when the late Bailey Smith, pastor eventually turned evangelist, spoke at a supposedly nonpartisan political gathering—ha ha—as they waited for presidential candidate Ronald Reagan to appear and keynote the evening. He made a vile and

offensive offhand comment that would stun many in the audience and then beyond, further galvanizing the fracturing denomination until it permanently split in 1990. Smith noted, "It is interesting at great political rallies how you have a Protestant to pray, and then you have a Catholic to pray, and then you have a Jew to pray. With all due respect to those dear people, my friend God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew. For how in the world can God hear the prayer of a man who says that Jesus Christ is not the true Messiah." The backlash was palpable, with many clergy, laity, and church bodies sending angry protest letters. It was a bellwether moment that caused, that forced, many of us to consider the breadth and depth and the very meaning of prayer. None of us, no matter our beliefs or our faith tradition, has a monopoly on our access to the essence of holy presence we vainly call God! For me, prayer is a constant stream of consciousness, all my thoughts that carry me through the day.

My fear and even my unfortunate promise is that this sermon will probably leave you unfulfilled, unsatisfied, telling you exactly the kinds of things you already know deep down in the recesses of your soul, that you already are predisposed to believe on some intuitive level in your hearts and minds to be true, but would rather not be forced to hear from the preacher, a reminder you would rather not be given in such a sacred space and time. Just a hunch! Some might think that some things are better left unsaid from the pulpit, best if totally unspoken, but would be better suited perhaps if otherwise saved as corridor talk or as speculative musings reserved for the less declaratively imprimatur associated with the classroom! Not! Such is the risk of preaching with any modicum of honest inquiry! Here but by the grace of God go I! We begin our homiletical journey together just as curious as the disciples were back on that day when they raised this very important question!

**Jesus' answer to the twelve begins easily, benignly and innocently enough, with Jesus highly recommending that when his disciples pray,**

that they follow a specific formula. Jesus then provides for them the model prayer that came to be known as The Our Father or The Lord's Prayer, articulating each component line by line. It follows a basic pattern that is not surprising in any way imaginable. Sadly, it is a prayer that risks monotony as it exposes itself to receiving nothing more than lip service, with many of the faithful simply going through the motions because of a familiarity that usually tends to breed a certain level of contempt! The prayer begins with an acknowledgement of God as a parental figure, the One Jesus called Abba, Father, revealing a personal and parental relationship, the likes of which had not been so readily available or understood throughout Jesus' forebears' evolutionary identity as the liberated tribes and clans shifted from Hebrews to Israelites to Jews, the children of Israel becoming a nationalistic and religious juggernaut in the Near East, except when they were not, oppression always nipping closely at their heels! God was first revealed to Moses as Yahweh in the burning bush, an elusive deity hidden in the mystery of nature as well as shadowed in confusing, even confounding, doublespeak, "I am who or that I am!" "I am being who or that I am being!" Not a lot of handles to get much of a theological grip here! Jesus closes the gap between the distance of a God seemingly far away to a God who is intimately up close and personal and steadfastly accessible. The prayer then quickly shifts to a bit of flattery, declaring a knowledge of God's name as "hallowed," to be revered or revered, to acknowledge that God is indeed the pure essence of holy presence. The prayer asks that God's realm would come on earth as it presumably already exists in the heavenly places, a hope for Isaiah's peaceable realm on earth as well as reflecting Paul's beautifully described egalitarian humanity in which there are no discrepancies, no differences separating or segregating one human being from another. Traditionally the word "kingdom" is voiced here, while others choose to invoke the image or idea of "queendom," as a strongly advocated reminder of the feminine images of God. I on the other hand, prefer, am most

comfortable with, the image of realm because it is not sexist oriented in any manner, but images an all-embracing, all-encompassing, all-inclusiveness, hospitable of all persons and the God who is neither male or female and yet is mysteriously equally both! I fear, however, we do not realize or understand the radicality of that which we pray when we pray for the coming of God's realm here in our midst. It is a prayer calling for a revolution, a reconfiguring of society, a reordering of the world order, a radical transformation in every corner of the planet, God's global village, where there is despair caused by inequities, yes in every oppressive societal context. It does indeed directly involve a political uprising, a revolt in every way that oft divisive word conveys, and dares suggest. It was the very thing Jesus was accused of doing as a peasant reformer. Yes, Jesus was accused of leading an insurrection by his followers against Rome. It is the reason for his execution by crucifixion, declared guilty, convicted of the crime of sedition against the state, against Rome, despite there being no proof he ever sought to lead, much less tried to instigate an insurrection. After all, Jesus' realm was of an eternal nature, not to be confused with the finite limitations of any civil authority, any governance of state. Yes, that is the content of our prayer when we pray God's realm, when we pray God's will on earth as it is in the heavenly places!

The prayer then petitions the Holy One, imploring that our daily needs be met, "daily bread" being metaphorical for securing all life's necessities. And finally, the prayer requests a blanket forgiveness of sins, debts, or trespasses whichever tradition floats the proverbial boat, including the mandatory demand, the necessity that in seeking God's forgiveness for the major and minor errors we commit, that we promise to forgive one another. It is absolute! When I was in Big Timber, Montana, the church I served preferred "debts," because the Lutherans used "trespasses!" So ecumenically minded! **This forgiveness equation is an indication that one is dependent on the other, that you**

cannot have one without the other. It is non-negotiable! This declaration assumes we will forgive our brothers and sisters, all the time, every time, as Jesus says elsewhere, “70 x 7! In other words, infinitum! The prayer ends with the hope that God will not submit us to trials and temptations, the things that imperil us as we live our lives, the things that diminish our humanity, that literally make us less human. These words are a reminder of the early torture and terror that awaited Jesus’ early followers, persecution a very real daily grind. If today’s lection stopped here, all would be well and good, no cause or pause for concern. Ah, but Jesus does not stop with teaching us the content of prayer along with specific instructions about how to pray, presenting to the disciples then and one and all now, the model prayer to sooth our spirits, a salve for our oft weary and worn souls. In an abrupt twist, Jesus offers some further commentary, the ideas put forth in the remainder of the narrative disconcerting, disturbing and troubling, in a host of oh so many ways. But the essence of its content cannot be avoided or ignored and so we will not be guilty of such!

The text quickly shifts to Jesus’ commentary on prayer, an analysis that in so many ways strike at our inclinations and our sensibilities, yes, our faithful and wishful dreaming, threatening our naïvely childish hopes and sincerest prayers, challenging not only what we believe, but the very content of our faith. Jesus tells an interesting story, that while having a parabolic feel about it and serving the same purpose, is really not a parable at all according to the specific literary rubrics, the standards that define one. He asks everyone present to imagine approaching a friend at the midnight hour because of a sudden, unexpected, need for some bread to feed an unexpected visitor. No matter the time of day or night this would constitute a serious situation because the protocols of ancient Near Eastern hospitality are on the line, clearly hanging in the balance. The host is expected to feed the guest, surprise visitor or not! Unfortunately, this

individual does not get the expected favored response but is quickly rebuffed and reprimanded, reminded not only of the late hour but that everyone has already gone to bed. The door has been locked and the kids are all quiet and safely tucked in the bed with the master of the house! You will just have to go to Kwik Trip! Good luck and good night! Evidently, however, this terse reaction is not satisfactory in the least to this man in desperate need of not just one, but three loaves of bread, and so he continues to plead his case. Eventually, perhaps inevitably, his persistence pays off in the nick of time. After all, these are supposedly friends and what would friends do for friends in need, no matter the hour of day or night? We are left to believe that the man in this tale got his bread, his errand having a productive, a satisfactory outcome. It is a nice story and not at all troubling in the least. It makes perfect sense. It is embedded in reality, and the way things usually go, the way things are intended. It is normal!

**Things suddenly get a bit dicey, a might tricky, as we continue to read, for Jesus, or whoever wrote these words, makes promises that cannot be kept, checks that cannot be cashed! Just try and pray to win the lottery! See where that will get you! The reader then and now is told that if they merely ask for something, no limit or condition put on the substance of the request, that it will be given. If we knock, just like the man in the story, the door will be opened for us. Everyone who asks will receive and everyone who searches will find. It is a blanket, no conditions, no qualifications, no equivocations, no ifs, ands, or buts statement.** These blank promises remind me of the old Gospel Song, "Let Us Have a Little Talk with Jesus," with the steadfastly secure lyrics, "Now let us have a little talk with Jesus; let us tell him all about our troubles; he will hear our faintest cry and he will answer by and by. . ." and so on and so on! **The writer then adds for effect, "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 you 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. . .? And it is in this last statement in which I believe we are given a hint, the key to unlocking the door to this text. First of all, let me remind you that the odds of Jesus actually uttering these words are slim to none. While many do not wish to hear such things, it is a very necessary fact to name, essential for any legitimate interpretation. First, in my estimation, it seems very unlike Jesus, very “un-Jesus-like,” to refer to his disciples as evil, in such a demeaning and derogatory manner. The comment seems flippant, a condemingly negative label completely devoid of loving grace, counter-intuitive to the rabbi’s endearing, embracing, and inclusive nature. Something simply does not seem quite right about this offensive branding. Second, notice that no matter what is asked by someone, the answer invariably and inevitably is found in the giving of the Holy Spirit. No matter the request, the desire of the heart, the response is always of a spiritual substance, an inclination, an indication that all our other kinds of prayer requests are somehow rendered moot and, perhaps even irrelevant. Yes, I am guessing here! Let me say that clearly!**

For all of us who have been indoctrinated and ingrained in the Christian faith tradition for so much of our lives, who have studied and learned, and have prayed untold numbers of individual and corporate prayers at church, perhaps the hardest lesson we discover is that we do not always get what we want, perhaps even what we think we need. Our life experience is contrary to, going against the words we read today. Our experiential reality is a counter polarity to these biblical promises. It is a hard thing to swallow, but inherent in what we might perceive to be outright, abject, rejections, there is a poignant, oft times painful lesson we must own and overcome if we are to find a way to somehow have the capacity to steel our resolve and remain faithful to God. What do we need? What will it take to enable us along with our prayers, to give us succor and the sacred ability, even the possibility of our being



emboldened and empowered to continue to zealously, passionately, believe with any veracity, to maintain any semblance of faithfulness whatsoever? How do we remain believers in any perceived power, not only in our prayers, but in the God to whom we offer our heartfelt and deepest thoughts, vulnerably exposed in our often narcissic requests as we hope against hopelessness that our prayers and pray will somehow be answered in some way or another, one way or another? These are the questions we can only answer for ourselves as we find our unique lifepaths to the Holy One! The late Baptist turned Episcopal priest, John Claypool, who at the time was serving on the faculty of the McAfee School of Theology of Mercer University, was being treated for cancer. It eventually took his life. Faculty and students rallied around this beloved professor and prayed earnestly and diligently for a positive outcome. As glad and as grateful a recipient as he was, Claypool never bought into the hype. When asked what he believed regarding all the praying that was taking place around him, he remarked that it was the power and strength for this difficult journey that welled up from the sacred acts offered by this lovingly prayerful community. From their compassionate and caring prayers, strong relational bonds were built and sustained that indeed strengthened his resolve as he fought this metastasizing biological demon. His interpretation of the meaning of prayer, a life of prayer, gave me a very different and appreciative perspective from the one engrained in me from an early age. **I sincerely believe there is untapped and unlimited power in our prayers when they are released and that power is set free in our midst when our prayers, our verbal and nonverbal offerings to God are boldly and humbly made. The meaning or value is in these sacred acts, not so much on the outcomes, the wishes, stirring in our hearts and minds. Yes, for many this is quite simply not enough, an unacceptable, unsatisfactory, suggestion, an untenable position, perhaps a copout, a most unfulfilling musing, but it is the best and the most I have to offer. Anything more, or less, would be dishonest!**

Part of our dilemma stems from our grotesque imagination when we consider the nature of God. We are the ones who are guilty of codifying and concretizing the nature of prayer, even reducing it to institutional forms that are cold, detached and distant, devoid of meaning. Much of our confusion, and yes, our consternation, stems from our limited and juvenile, perhaps infantile, perspective and perception of the nature of God, frozen in time images born out of an awkwardly bizarre tradition that images a bearded man in the sky who sits idly by on a big, white, throne, all the while waiting for our laundry list of supplications while doling out favors. If the contemporary, twenty-first century Church and the churches of this still emerging and evolving postmodern era are to survive, we must dismiss, disregard, yes destroy, kill this demonic image of a theistic deity whom we have literally created in our fictional minds, even as these divinely bankrupt ideas have been intimated, subtly described in holy writ, yes, in the Bible. Yes, we have dared made God in our own image, an ongoing version or replica of the once despised cultic visage of a golden calf. As Xenophanes once astutely observed, "If horses had Gods, they would look like horses!" The audacity of belittling whatever, whoever, constitutes the very essence, the vastness of unimaginable, unfathomable, holiness, meekly captured or encapsulated, in some trivial physical, and yes, anthropomorphic form. Not good! The biblical writer astutely and soberly once boldly declared that "God is spirit and those who worship God must worship God in spirit and in truth." We must find a way to move away from any and all anthropomorphically infused images of God, a deity who walks and talks in bodily form, far more human than divine. We must replace this shallow, pedestrian and perverse, image of God with an understanding of God whose consistency is the essence of pure holiness, a divine presence wrapped in transcendent mystery, evoking the most wondrous response of emotionally driven human awe and wonder. We can succeed at that very thing when we consider the magnitude of invoking such a magnificently mysterious sensory awareness that imagines God as Holy Other, Ground of All Being, or numinous Spirit.

God is not the man upstairs whom we often jokingly refer! God is not a sugar daddy in the sky who is readily at our disposal, intervening in life's complexities and tragedies, an interactive being just waiting to do our bidding. The difference between God as Being and a being is palpable, so hugely ginormous, so colossal in every way imaginable, that it defies all language, all our limited vocabulary, the best of our vernacular, all comprehension and imagination, exposing the futile and pitifully, pathetically, perfunctory nature of our words. When we pray, our spirits are amazingly, mystically, joining with the great eternal Spirit of the universe, joining in an amazing dance where the greatest distance between God and human is closed, evaporated in a twinkling of an eye. It is literally where heaven and earth meet, very much like what the Irish describe as the thin places in their beautiful countryside, springs of water surrounded by a lush, green field, venues that appear to make heaven and earth almost inseparable!

**In her book titled *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, Anne Lamott confesses her beliefs and doubts, admitting, "I do not know much about God and prayer, but I have come to believe over the last twenty-five years, that there's something to be said about keeping prayer simple. Help! Thanks! Wow!" I believe she has said it all, soberly speaking for many of us who oft times find even a modicum of a pedestrian prayer life way beyond our pay grade! In her analysis of the first aspect of her trinitarian assumptions, Lamott says what we all often think and feel about our world today. She declares, "It is all hopeless. Even for a crabby optimist like me, things couldn't be worse. Everywhere you turn, our lives and marriages and morale and government are falling to pieces. So many friends have broken children. The planet does not seem long for this world. Repent! Oh, wait, never mind. Help!"<sup>1</sup> So when we pray, let's agree to be honest, to be serious, to be sincere! And when you dare talk to God, just tell it**

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<sup>1</sup>Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (Riverhead Books, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2012), 11.

like it is because God already knows it all anyway! And who knows, a little nice flattery can't hurt and may even get us somewhere, close perhaps to where we want to be, getting what we need, if not what we want! After all, all this stuff is surely the essence, the substance, of pure unadulterated mystery indeed wrapped in much enigma! This much we all know as certain! Count on it! And I believe all these verbal histrionics or calisthenics, whatever they may be, take us right back to where we started, left with the prayer called Lord's, the parental prayer called The Our Father, the prayer that is a model for all our prayers and praying. I close with two contemporary versions of this ancient prayer, the first from *A New Zealand Prayer Book* and the second written by yours truly. Perhaps with new and alternative language, we can once again engage this prayer in new, refreshing, and exciting ways.

*Eternal Spirit,  
Earth-maker, Pain bearer, Life-giver,  
Source of all that is and that shall be,  
Father and Mother of us all,  
Loving God, in whom is heaven:*

*The hallowing of your name echo through the universe;  
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world;  
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings;  
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom  
sustain our hope and come on earth.*

*With the bread we need for today, feed us.  
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.  
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.  
From trial too great to endure, spare us.  
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.*

*For your reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.*

*Amen.*

***Gracious heavenly Parent,  
holy is the One who is the great "I AM."  
We pray for the divine age to come and for Your will to be  
accomplished, on earth as it is in the heavenly places of Your realm.  
Sustain us with holy food that transcends each and every day.  
Please forgive us our obligations as we forgive those who are  
obligated to us.  
Do not tempt us with the things of this world and keep us from all  
trials, anything that might diminish any of our relationships—with  
you, with one another, and with ourselves.  
For it is your sphere, your heavenly realm, your dominion, your  
splendor, majesty, and radiance forever and always. Amen.***

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and  
listens intently, hearing our prayers and responding accordingly!  
Amen and amen!**

**Following yesterday's service, two church members shared with me  
their favorite versions of The Lord's Prayer. I wish to share them with  
you.**

***God, who dwells in the realm of truth, may your  
Word be all-powerful in my mind. May the world I live in  
here on earth reflect the reality of love. May I think your  
thoughts, and make manifest your thoughts. Today, may I  
receive what I need. May my way be unblocked, as I unblock  
my heart to others. And when I'm tempted into fear, may I be  
guided back to loving thought: that love might be my experience  
and love might be my power, and love might be my happiness  
and peace, in every single moment of my day. Amen***

**—Marrienne Williamson**

*Give us this day our daily bread,  
for you will give what is good, O God.  
Now let us be faithful in receiving it.  
Holy is your name and holy is your realm,  
Where no one is given up for another's gain.  
Now let righteousness clear our minds.  
Forgive us our resentments and excuses  
that we assign as the debts of others.  
Now make us alive in your freedom.  
Lead us away from the temptations of haste  
and the trials of complacency, O God, lest  
we be found elsewhere when salvation arrives.*

—Rachel G. Hackenberg

