

Talking to God

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138

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

Luke 11:1-13

If you have ever spent much time around children, then you know how much of growing up is dependent on relationships. Babies have a lot of needs, but they can't meet any of them on their own. They cry a lot because it is the only way they can express their needs. Then, unlike infants, toddlers begin developing the ability to grab the things they want themselves. They have to be taught to ask before touching things because, while they are developing the skill to grab, they have not yet developed the reasoning to recognize that hot skillet will harm them if touched. Children eventually learn to look to their parents for permission before simply taking the things they want. And as they grow into adolescents and then teenagers, they often start taking the things they want, even when they know it is against the rules because their parents warn that certain things are bad for them. The hope is that through relationships of love and discipline they learn. Maturity is when young adults discover what they need versus what they want, when they should ask for help, and when they are able and ought to function on their own. Maturity is developed within relationships. Part of the process of maturity depends on what children learn in relationships; and if they learn to trust in the love and care they experience through those relationships. The same is true of us towards God. Christian maturity is based on what we learn through our experiences with God.

Our ability to know God cognitively will never be sustaining if our experiences don't prove what we think we know. The difficulty is that we live in a corrupted world, so we spend much of our lives grabbing for hot skillet that we are think are desirable, and we end up burning ourselves. And sometimes we blame God. Our faith journey is similar to a child's journey to maturity. We too must learn that our ability to **discern** and **obtain** the things we need requires our dependence on God.

Since God is our creator, we will never truly know joy until we live according to the creator's design. Consequently, the better we know God, the better we will know ourselves and the better we will be able to align ourselves with our unique purpose in this life. In our Colossians text, Paul tells his readers that "God made you alive **together with him**" and implores them to continue "to live your lives **in him**". According to Paul, our lives are inseparable from God and yet our ability to actively live out of that truth is not automatic. Those who desire to identify themselves as Christ's followers must make it our aim to establish ourselves in this relationship through faith. Like children, we must learn to seek God's help. Apart from God we cannot know our purpose or what we need to fulfill it.

The primary way humans interact with an invisible, intangible God is through prayer. When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, he offered a model that we still follow today. The version we have here in Luke is shorter than the one we recite from Matthew's gospel, but it maintains the same pattern. This pattern begins with acknowledging the one to whom we direct our prayers, "our father". Some people's difficult relationship with father figures makes this introductory appeal off-putting, but the reason why it is important is because it situates the prayer from the beginning within the context of an intimate relationship. The relationship of father to child is meant to evoke a feeling of protection, close connection, and love. At the time this was written, the disciples would also have understood a child's obligation to his father was to uphold the family's reputation and legacy. Consequently, beginning a prayer this way positions us as subordinate to something bigger than just our own immediate desires.

After claiming "our Father", we go on to elevate God's holy name. This is significant because names are fundamental to our understanding of one another. Most of us today do not have names that indicate anything significant about ourselves, but for most of human history people used names as descriptive. For instance, Smith derives from "smite" and historically indicated someone who shaped metal. Mr. Smith was the guy who

put shoes on your horse. When we say the name “God”, something is evoked in each one of us based on what we believe and how we have experienced God. Setting God’s name apart as holy, indicates our elevation of the way God has made godself known to us. The way we begin prayer is important because it reminds us that our prayers are not merely lifeless words, but an extension of an ongoing, reciprocal, vital relationship.

The disciples, like us, were concerned about how to pray. But how isn’t as important as why. How we pray only matters insofar as we position ourselves honestly to both speak and hear. The reason we pray will keep us coming back to prayer for a lifetime. We pray to remind ourselves of our dependance on God’s help, provision, and protection. And our dependance on God for these things is not merely for ourselves; it enables us to fulfil our unique role in bringing God’s Kingdom to this earth. When we fail to pray, we grab the hot skillet and get burned. Through prayer we learn when and how to handle a hot skillet so that we can help prepare meals to feed others.

Our dedication to prayer indicates much about the way we think about our relationship with God. Failing to pray altogether indicates autonomy from God; a belief that we do not need God to know or to fulfil our role in God’s Kingdom. In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he warns us against being “puffed up ... by a human way of thinking”. His remedy to this is to have us “hold fast” to God by humbly and honestly recognizing our dependance on God. Likewise, Jesus’ parables about prayer elevate the persistence of those who continue in prayer. We are encouraged to ask, search, and knock. Incidentally, the word knock means to make a disturbance. We may not love the loud cries of impatient infants, but Jesus invites us to refuse to be silenced until our needs are met. Jesus’ intimacy with God, even through all his suffering, illustrates the depth available to all who persist in seeking God through prayer.

Life is complex. Sometimes praying can seem complex. We humans passionately cry out to God, oftentimes on opposite sides of important issues and we wonder whose prayers

will be answered. But prayer, just like communication in any of our human relationships, is primarily about developing the relationship itself rather than obtaining our own desires. If we believe prayer is transactional, rather than relational, we risk becoming cold and calloused and our prayers will fade.

Through prayer we learn about the heart of God. Abraham appealed for God's mercy on behalf of the righteous in Sodom and, through his persistent requests, God agreed. At the same time, God was also answering the loud laments of those suffering the injustice and exploitation from those harmed by that same city. God heard and answered on both sides. God was not silent; God was merciful in being slow to judgment and also righteous in providing judgment. Prayers on both sides mattered. Persistence mattered. And just like in today's parable, the Kingdom of God is being formed through those who pray. God desires to provide bread on behalf of the hungry, just like God desires to spare the righteous from destruction. Our prayers remind us that God is the source of our needs and will direct us in how we can best participate in God's work of provision and protection for others on this earth.

We do not pray because God is absent when we are silent. God is always present. Our prayers remind us, of God's presence. Our life is in God; we are born of relationship. Today's Psalm offers an ironic, all too human example of prayer. In it, the psalmist reminds himself of God's love and then begs not to be abandoned. Well God is never the one who abandons us. When we fail to look to God, we are the ones who abandon God. So when the Psalmist says, "When I called, you answered me; you increased my strength within me", we recognize Jesus' own words. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to all who seek good gifts from God. God's presence and power are always near. Prayer helps us remember.

May we be a people who see ourselves as part of God's story, who look to God to understand our role in the story, and whose strength demonstrates the maturity of our ongoing relationships with God.