

Sometimes We Get the Fish, Too

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
July 29, 2007*

Luke 11:1-13

[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and, when he stopped, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “Whenever you pray, say:

‘Father,
may your name be honored as holy;
may your kingdom come.
Give us the bread we need every day.
And forgive us our sins,
because we, too, forgive everyone who owes us.
And don’t lead us into testing.’”

And he said to them, “Can any of you imagine having a friend and going to him at midnight and saying to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine has come to me on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him,’ and from inside, he answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door’s already locked; my kids are in bed; I’m in bed. I can’t get up to give you something’?

“I tell you, if he won’t get up and give him something because he is his friend, then, at least to avoid shame, he’ll get up and give him whatever he needs.

“I tell you also, Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. Because everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds, and to everyone who knocks it will be opened.

“Which of you fathers, whose son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead of a fish? Or, if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you know how to give good gifts to your children, though you are evil, how much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit from heaven to those who ask him?”

Children’s Story

More than anything in the whole world, Clarence Bentdent wanted to play the trumpet. When he was almost ten years old, he begged his mom and dad to buy him a trumpet for his birthday.

Clarence’s mom and dad talked it over. They knew how much Clarence wanted to play the trumpet. And they wanted him to play, too. So they made their decision.

For Clarence’s tenth birthday, they drove into town, past the grocery store, past the bicycle store, past the hardware store. The music store was just ahead!

But they drove past the music store, too. Then they turned into a driveway with a sign that said “Drs. Musgrave and Musgrave, Orthodontists.” Clarence Bentdent wasn’t getting a trumpet for his tenth birthday, he was getting braces!

At first Clarence was disappointed. Then he was sad. Then he was angry! But when he calmed down, he was thankful.

You see, Clarence had crooked teeth, too crooked for playing the trumpet. But the braces . . . the braces would set his crooked teeth straight. Then Clarence could shape his lips just so, put his tongue against his teeth just so, and blow his trumpet just so – the first note of a lifelong symphony.

Clarence Bentdent wanted a trumpet for his tenth birthday. He got braces instead. That was what he needed. And maybe he didn’t know it at first, but that was what he wanted, too.

Sermon

Prayer doesn't come naturally to most of us. We wonder what to say. And we grope for the words to say it with. This difficulty is multiplied when we need to pray in front of other people, at a Bible study, for example, or at a wedding reception. At times like that, we're afraid of sounding like ESL dropouts. We're afraid of sounding like spiritual under-achievers.

Apparently prayer didn't come naturally to Jesus's disciples either. No doubt they had been brought up to pray. They probably knew several standard prayers, prayers for certain times of day or for certain times of the year. But with Jesus, prayer was different somehow. Again and again, they saw Jesus pray, they heard Jesus pray. And they wanted to be like their teacher. "Lord," one of them said, "teach us to pray" (v. 1). They needed some instruction. Jesus gave it to them.

First, Jesus told them what to pray. To begin with, there were the big themes: "May your name be honored as holy; may your kingdom come" (v. 2). In other words, "God, be faithful. Fulfill your plans and promises. Come to this broken world, and put it right." When God acts in faithfulness, mercy, and justice, then God's people — and all people — will praise God's name. In this prayer, Jesus tells his disciples to pray for the very thing that God is doing right before their eyes through Jesus. Jesus embodies the holy and gracious name of God. Jesus is the king who has come to his people, come back to put things right by his cross and resurrection and by his Spirit. Jesus tells his disciples to pray the big themes.

He also tells them to pray for everyday needs: "Give us the bread we need every day" (v. 3). The Gospel teaches that if we keep our eyes on the big things — the name of God, the kingdom of God — God will look after the everyday things: what's to eat, what's to drink, what's to wear. But Jesus teaches that God welcomes prayers about those everyday things. God is the God of the everyday. And we live in the everyday. So we pray for our house to sell. We pray for our grandmother to live. We pray for our mom and dad not to get a divorce. Jesus tells his disciples to pray the big themes and to pray for everyday needs.

And he also tells them to pray for deliverance from internal and external threats: "Forgive us our sins, because we, too, forgive everyone who owes us. And don't lead us into testing" (v. 4). We all need to forgive and to be forgiven. We all do wrong, and we all suffer wrong. Forgiveness is a healing balm for wounded souls and for battered relationships. And as much as we need God to forgive us, we need to forgive one another. The Gospel more than hints that God's forgiveness depends on our being forgiving. This is bad news if you like to hold grudges. Being unforgiving is often evidence of pride. What's worse, the proud seldom seek forgiveness for themselves, even from God. But we need to forgive and to be forgiven.

Then there's "testing." Testing decides if you've got what it takes. Job was tested. Satan wanted to prove that Job didn't measure up. The test was destructive; that's the nature of some tests. Most of what Job valued and loved was destroyed. Job himself was nearly destroyed. All he had left was his integrity. Only the arrogant would welcome that kind of testing. We don't need testing. We know that we don't measure up. (And the arrogant only measure up in their inflated self-regard.) So Jesus says, "Plead for forgiveness instead of testing."

After he told them what to pray — for big themes, for everyday needs, for deliverance from threats — Jesus told them what to expect. It was unimaginable, he said, that God would not respond to their prayers. Imagine a neighbor, he said, who disregards the basic expectations of village hospitality, refusing to get up and provide a few loaves of bread, making flimsy excuses instead, and in the process undermining a way of life. Imagine such a neighbor, Jesus said. But they couldn't imagine such a neighbor. Such a thing was unheard of! It would not happen. And in the same way, God would not fail to respond to the prayers of his children; God would not fail to give them whatever they need.

“So,” Jesus says, “pray expectantly.” “Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.” (v. 9). He says, “You know how to give good gifts to your children” (v. 13) — “when your son asks for a fish, you give him a fish; when he asks for an egg, you give him an egg” (cf. vv. 11-12). And when he asks for a snake or for a scorpion . . . Well, we’ll talk about that another day. “You know how to give good gifts — even though you’re evil, even though you wouldn’t survive testing, even though you don’t measure up — you know how to give good gifts, but your Father knows even better how to give good gifts. And he will give the Holy Spirit to everyone who asks” (cf. v. 13).

But wait a minute. Why is Jesus talking about the Holy Spirit? Who’s asking for the Holy Spirit? Where does that come from? Is Jesus (or Luke) pulling a bait and switch here? The talk was about big themes, everyday needs, and deliverance from threats. The requests were for three loaves of bread, a fish, and an egg. But Jesus says, “You’ll get the Holy Spirit.”

Little Lauren died last week after a long illness. Her family and friends prayed for her. They prayed a lot. They prayed for healing. And in these last days, no doubt, they prayed for comfort and for peace. That’s what they prayed for. But what do they get, the Holy Spirit?

When you pray that God will keep guard over your son in the military, that God will guide your daughter who will be living away from home for the first time, that God will loosen dementia’s grip on your dad — when you pray for these things, are you praying for the Holy Spirit? When you ask God for a fish, aren’t you asking God for a fish?

But Jesus says, “You’ll get the Holy Spirit.” Is he giving song-writing ideas to Mick Jagger? “You can’t always get what you want, but . . . you get what you need.” Is Jesus pulling a bait and switch? “You ask for one thing, and I’ll give you another.”

No. It’s not a bait and switch. (My friend Harry Winters helped me to see this.) It’s not a bait and switch. When you pray for your son, when you pray for your daughter, when you pray for your dad, what you want more than anything else is this: that God will be near to them, that God will be a real presence in their lives, that, however circumstances unfold, God will not leave their side. In other words, you want the Holy Spirit to come to them and to stay with them.

At the same time, you want the Holy Spirit to come to you. You want the Spirit to sustain you through tests of disappointment and tragedy. You want the Spirit to keep burning within you a hunger and thirst for the kingdom of God, the kingdom within which your son and your daughter and your dad will be safe forever, the kingdom within which little Lauren lives on. Our hope is the kingdom, always the kingdom. And the Spirit, Scripture tells us, is the guaranty, the guaranty of the kingdom that God has promised to give us. The Spirit is what we want. The Spirit is what we need. The Spirit is what we get — through Jesus.

So, we’ll pray. We’ll pray as Jesus taught us. We’ll pray for God’s name and for God’s kingdom. We’ll pray for deliverance from threats. And we’ll pray for everyday needs: for a few loaves of bread, for a fish, for the body or soul of someone we love. And God will respond. God will give us what we need. God will give us what we really want. Sometimes we’ll get the fish, too. But above all, we will get the Holy Spirit, who is God with us.