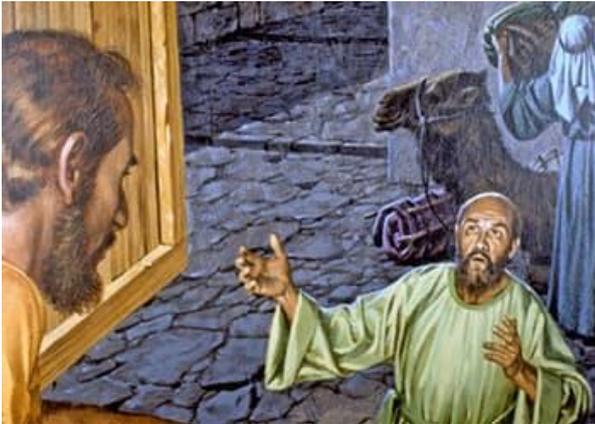


Highfield Rd Uniting Church

Confident to converse

Luke 11: 1 - 12



Father, your name must be made sacred,
and your kingdom must come.

Give us today the bread we need for
tomorrow.

You must let go of our sins

for we are letting go of the debts of others;
and do not carry us into temptation.

I have for many years been a bit confused about the connection between the words of prayer that Jesus offered the disciples when they asked, “Teach us to pray”, and the parable of the man annoying his neighbour at midnight that follows. Other than the mention of bread, there seems to be no connection. I have known for a while that the translation for the parable is misleading - the Greek word translated *persistence* should be translated as *boldness* or *shamelessness* - but that still didn’t connect the two in my mind. Until this week when our Presbytery Minister, Sunny Chen who is also a lecturer in Greek at the Pilgrim College, pointed out the difficulty of translating the words of the Lord’s Prayer due to English not really being able to easily capture the grammar of the Greek verbs. All the statements in the prayer are imperatives; hence my rewriting of the prayer at the beginning with all the ‘may’ turned into ‘must’. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, Jesus wasn’t just giving them words, but a manner, an attitude to prayer - lean into the relationship you have with God and be bold in prayer.

We are so familiar with the term that we don’t give it a second thought but really, how bold is it for us to call God, the supreme divine being, Father? It’s one thing for Jesus to call God Father, but us!? I can imagine that Luke thought it amplified his argument about being bold by simply having the word *Father*, rather than Matthew’s more familiar, “Our Father who is in heaven.” If it’s prayer, then it’s a bit obvious that you are talking to God in heaven. Or is Luke trying to reflect the nativity stories, the Incarnation, and implying that God is not just in heaven? Another facet of boldness.

And the body of the prayer, the five requests, maintains both the boldness and the relationship established in the title *Father*. Instead of thinking of a group of cultured adults speaking these words in worship, as liturgy, imagine a child coming to their parent. A child who has not yet had the niceties of manner instilled into them. Give me bread! Forgive my sins! The instruction after the parable to Ask, Search, and Knock maintains this idea of a relationship like child and parent. Not the patriarchal idea that developed in our culture of stern, dominant, head of the household who must be approached with deference and respect, but the loving parent who responds to requests. A fish, an egg; given with no complaint or replacement with nasty items. And isn’t that the sort of relationship that we want with our children? We want our children to talk to us and not be afraid of a negative response. We want them to be bold, open and communicative. That is the attitude of prayer that Jesus is trying to teach his disciples, not a set of words that have some magical property of being the right composition, but an attitude - be bold in prayer.

The parable of the neighbour being awakened at midnight is not just easier to understand when you put in the right translation - shamelessness and not persistence - it is also easier if you understand the 1st Century culture of shame. Middle Eastern culture lives in hospitality, to not have bread to welcome a visitor, even if it is the middle of the night, is a cause of great shame. The man needed bread. So, while his behaviour in rousing his neighbour, children, and all, may seem shameless, it is necessary to meet the need of saving him from even greater shame. He's not just asking for bread because he has the midnight hungries, he has a need to feed a visiting traveller. And that opens us to consider what we are praying for. This is not about boldness for our own sake, but boldness for others, boldness for ministry, boldness to ask for God's help to uphold the integrity of God's name. I don't think praying for parking spaces fits into this category but praying for safe travel does.

I have often wondered why the disciples needed to be taught how to pray, even if they are rough fishermen who didn't have a lot of time for synagogue. They come from a religious culture that is drenched in prayer. Temple liturgy, synagogue gatherings, the book of Psalms. However, much like the mistranslation of boldness into persistence, I think the whole idea of God - the Almighty, Omnipotent One - brings about prayers drenched in awe and humility, like Psalm 8.

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
When I look at the heavens
the work of your fingers
what are human beings that you are mindful of them?*

The liturgy of the Temple with sacrifices and burnt offerings and the proper way to read scripture or offer prayers in the synagogue, much of which we have taken over into our liturgy, can have the effect of separating and isolating us from the God who came to us in Jesus Christ. Much like the prayers of the priests of Baal on the mountain facing Elijah, our prayers can become full of cowering humility and dancing around the point as if our needs aren't important enough for God. Instead, Elijah simply asks for what was needed. It is as if people forget the second half of the Psalm 8

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honour.*

It's not that we think ourselves worthy to talk to God, it is that God has claimed us as children and wants us to be in relationship. God wants us to come in prayer and simply and boldly ask for what is needed.

We are so used to the liturgical words of the Lord's Prayer that we miss how refreshing and enlivening they can be for our prayer life, particularly in the stark simple version in Luke's account. Respect and awe are important when thinking about God, but we have been welcomed into a relationship of child and loving parent. Be confident in approaching God and converse and request and share. Ask, search, and knock. Come to the one we are bold enough to call *Father* and place your needs before God with a confidence that comes from being in a relationship that stems from the great act of God in raising the crucified Jesus to be the Risen Christ. In him we are invited and encouraged to call God *Father*.