**Jesus and the Life of Prayer**

**January 13, 2019**

**“Praying to Our Father” (Matthew 7:7-12)**

**1. Introduction: *Cheese Please!***

No matter how much you prepare for it, the children’s moment can always catch you by surprise.No matter how carefully you plan the questions that you’re going to ask, you’re never fully prepared for the surprising answers that you might get.

 This happened to Reverend Maguire many years ago when my son Ethan was a little lad. Gathered at the front for the children’s moment, Rev. Maguire was teaching the children about prayer. He was using a similar approach to that of Jesus, stressing that if our parents supply our needs when we ask, then God will respond to our prayers to an even greater degree. At that time, it was widely known that Ethan’s favourite food was cheese. So, Rev. Maguire asked Ethan, “If you asked your Mom or Dad for cheese, would they give you some?” “*No*,” Ethan replied. Now, at that time, we were trying to cut down on our cheese intake, so we were beginning to limit the amount of cheese we were eating. Undaunted, Rev. Maguire asked again, “If you were hungry and you asked for cheese would your parents give you some?” “*No,*” Ethan said, shaking his head. Giving it one more shot, Rev. Maguire asked him, “What if you were completely starving and dragging yourself into the house weary with hunger, would they give you some cheese?” “No,” Ethan responded. By this time, the congregation had broken into laughter and I was somewhat embarrassed because this whole incident made me look like a cruel father who denied his child a piece of cheese.

 I don’t remember how Rev. Maguire recovered from this failed Q & A with Ethan, but in a strange way, this cheese incident does teach us about prayer. While cheese is good, too much of it is not so good for us. So, Sherri and I were right to try to limit the amount of cheese that our family was eating. Ethan was answering honestly. He did not always get a piece of cheese when he wanted it. When we pray, we don’t always get the answer we want. This is because our heavenly Father knows what is best for us.

**2. The Act of Prayer**

 Over the next eight weeks we’re going to journey with Jesus and observe from his teachings and his life how to live a life of prayer. Our journey with Jesus and prayer begins with this passage where Jesus encourages us to pray to God and assures us of God’s faithful response. He says to each one of us,

“*Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened*” (Matthew 7:7).

 Notice that each of Jesus’ commands (*ask*, *seek*, and *knock*) is followed by a declaration of God’s faithful response. So, we are encouraged to take initiative before God – to ask, to seek and to knock. Yet we must realize that the outcome is in God’s hands- it is he who answers, gives and opens the door. Jesus’ declaration, then, assures us God’s response and this is the impetus for us to exercise faith and pray. At the same time Jesus’ words should not be misunderstood to mean that God is like Santa Claus, granting our every wish. Jesus spoke these words as his Sermon on the Mount neared its conclusion, so it must be read within that larger context.

 As I did my research for this passage, I found that many of the biblical commentators went to great lengths to stress that Jesus’ words here should not be viewed as a blank cheque from God that grants us everything we want. They stressed that this text does not support a *health and wealth* theology where we get *everything* that we desire. Prayer is *not* intended as a means of manipulating God into satisfying our wants. When we read this passage within its larger context, the Sermon on the Mount, we come to a better understanding of Jesus’ invitation to ask, seek and knock. The Sermon on the Mount is focused on *God’s kingdom*, so when we ask, seek and knock, we do so in light of God’s kingdom rule in our lives and in our world.

 Within the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers us a model prayer, which we call the Lord’s Prayer. This prayer clearly instructs us to *ask* God for our material and spiritual needs – “*Give us today the food we need,and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us*” (Matthew 6:11). So, we can ask God to provide our daily needs. But as we pray about material things, we need to remember that Jesus taught us to have a proper attitude toward wealth and possessions. He didn’t want us to let this stuff become the focus of our lives, leading us to hoard earthly treasures. Instead, he challenges us to store up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20). Jesus knew the danger that worldly goods posed for the spiritual life. In the Sermon on the Mount he warns us that money can become so important to us that our commitment to God takes a back seat. That’s why he said, “You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money” (Matthew 6:24).

 But in the real worldmoney is important because it’s needed for paying for our basic needs, like food, shelter, and clothing. So, how can we be focused on God and not be concerned about these basic needs? Right after warning us that we can’t serve both God and money, Jesus tells us not to *worry* about these everyday needs because God will provide for us (Matthew 6:25). He points to the birds of the air and the flowers of the field as examples of God’s benevolent care (Matthew 6:26-30). Arguing that if God provides for the birds and the flowers, he will certainly meet our needs because we are so much more valuable to him than these (Mathew 6:26, 30). Since our heavenly Father knows that we need all these things, we can “*Seek* the Kingdom of Godabove all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need” (Matthew 6:33). Unencumbered by the cares of life, we are freed to put God and his Kingdom first.

 As I speak these words from Scripture, I realize that there may be those among us who have real anxieties about having enough to meet the basic needs in life. Poverty and financial hardships are real and I don’t want the expression, “God will provide” to become a cliché that we throw around as a Band-Aid solution. Instead of just saying, “God will provide,” perhaps we need to consider some practical ways of helping others. Those who have enough, or more than enough, should be thinking about how they can become an answer to prayer. As our attitudes toward our wealth and possessions become more in line with the values of the Kingdom, perhaps we can seek first the Kingdom of God by becoming more generous and help those in need.

 While our material needs are important, our spiritual needs have a much greater importance in our lives. While we can have lots of worries about our financial situation, we can be totally weighed down by our spiritual condition. In the Lord’s Prayer, we *ask* God to forgive us our sins, but as a result we are to offer forgiveness to others in light of God’s mercy and grace. In the passage prior to this one, Jesus is critical of those who go around noticing the speck of dust in their brother or sister’s eye, yet are oblivious to the log in their own (Matthew 7:3-4). He advises us to remove the log from our own eye before we even attempt to remove the speck of dust from another’s eye (Matthew 7:5). So, when we ask God to forgive us, we are acknowledging the log in our own eye and we’re asking God for his help to remove it and restore our eyesight. And when we’ve experienced God’s forgiveness, we become more compassionate, understanding and forgiving toward others. This enables us to help others to find forgiveness.

 When we pray, we are *asking* God for his help. We’re recognizing that we can’t do it on our own and so, taking a step of faith, we freely admit to our reliance on God. But when we pray, we’re also *seeking*. Jesus calls us to *seek* God’s Kingdom and his righteousness as our top priority (Matthew 6:33). When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we say, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9), expressing our deep desire for God’s Kingdom to be manifest on earth. But as I was reflecting on prayer this week and thinking about all the things that we seek, I wrote down these words – “I want to connect with God.” Now I know that God is always present with us and so it seems a bit absurd that I need to connect with him. But in the routine of my daily life, it becomes all too easy to forget God. Prayer brings us to a place where we pause and seek God and his will for our lives. Its our way of saying, “here I am, God, I’m listening.” Seek God and you will find Him.

 Christian writer, Richard Foster has written, “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic in our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ. William Blake tells us that our task in life is to learn to bear God’s ‘beams of love.’ How often we fashion cloaks of evasion – beam-proof shelters – in order to elude our Eternal Lover. But when we pray God slowly and graciously reveals to us our hiding places, and sets us free from them” (*Celebration of Discipline,* p. 30). So when we *knock,* God opens up the door, the gateway to the path of life (Matthew 7:13-14) and when we cross over the threshold we open ourselves up to all that God has for us.

 When we *ask, seek and knock*, we are admitting to God that we are poor in spirit, humble and hungering for righteousness. When we pray, we are acknowledging that only God can satisfy these deeper needs. In prayer we learn to trust God and abandon ourselves to him alone.

**3. The Character of God**

 So, how can we grow deeper in the life of prayer? How can we surrender our lives to God and depend upon him, when our tendency is to maintain control over our lives? How do we ask, seek and knock for God’s will for our lives when we’re not sure what that may mean for us? For many of us, it entails a careful examination of our thinking about God and letting Scripture reshape our ideas about God. Do we have the impression that God is distant, uncaring or uninvolved in our lives? Or do we think that God is mean and vengeful? If God were like that, why would anyone want to pray? Jesus teaches us that God is our heavenly Father and he deeply cares and graciously provides for his children (Matthew 7:11). Jesus reassures us that our heavenly Father wants to give *good things* to his children.

 To drive this point home, Jesus uses a *how much more* argument. He begins by posing an absurd and rhetorical question to his audience, “If your child asks for bread, would you give him a stone? If he asks for a fish, would you give him a snake?” (7:9-10). The parents in the crowd would have undoubtedly thought that no normal parent would do such a terrible thing to their hungry child. No parent would ever mock his child’s hunger by giving him something resembling what he requested but was in fact a completely different thing. The absurdity of Jesus’ question directly leads his punch line, “So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him” (7:11). If you, less-than-perfect parents, give bread to your child, when he asks for bread, then, your perfect heavenly Father will most certainly respond to you and meet your needs.

 Now most of us who are parents would admit that they are less than perfect. Even the best parents in the world sometimes make mistakes. But most parents care for their children and provide their basic needs. When they ask for food, they don’t give them dirt. But our less-than-perfect parenting pales in comparison to the love of our heavenly Father. If we give good things to our kids, *how much more* will our heavenly Father give even greater things to his hungry children.

 The greatest Father of all embraces you and wants the very best for you. So, you can completely trust him. When you ask, seek and knock, you’re not talking to a neglectful or distracted parent who doesn’t care. You’re talking to your heavenly Father, who knows exactly what’s going on in your life. He knows about your struggles, fears, anxieties, stresses, pains, and sorrows. Thomas Merton wrote, “There are so many Christians who have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and the power of that Love to do them good, to bring them happiness” (*What is Contemplation,* p. 7)

 So, run to the open arms of your heavenly Father. He loves and cares about you, more than you can imagine. Feel the freedom to talk to your heavenly Father and tell him about all the stuff that’s going on in your life. And when you experience the goodness of God touching your life, remember to pass that goodness on to others. It’s no mistake that the Golden Rule comes at the end of Jesus’ words on prayer – “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). Prayer does not change God; it changes us.