

# Late Night Prayers of Fish and Snakes

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Thursday, July 25, 2019

Scripture: [Luke 11:1–13](#)

## Introduction to the Scripture

So, indeed, I am interested in how we learned—and are learning—to pray today. So, let's go back to the instruction manual, shall we?

Today we'll read from the Gospel of Luke, as Jesus provides both a well known... and less well known lesson in prayer to his disciples. You will hear very familiar words, and you will hear words that lead you to that most Holy Question™: What on earth are you talking about, Jesus?

As you listen to these words, I'll ask you to think of the questions they answer about prayer. I'll ask you to think of your own questions about prayer.

## Sermon

I think one of the things that frustrates me about the pattern of scriptures that so much of the church follows is that a bunch of Jesus's real *teaching* ministry falls in the summer, when... well, let's just go ahead and say there's many reasons why people know the whole story about the manger and the star and all that... and not so much about Jesus's wild egg and scorpions parables.

Jesus's teaching here is a direct connection to two well-known stories prior:

1. The Parable of the Good Samaritan as an answer to the wealthy lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?"

2. The story of Martha and Mary, two sisters who have different responses to Jesus asking, “What is most needful?” or, “What should our response be to the presence of the teacher?”

So today, the disciples get to ask the question, and theirs is, “How should we pray?”

It’s a good question... most of us, I suspect, were “taught” how to pray, maybe simply as a particular posture, maybe particular words. But what praying was *for*, or how it changed you... maybe not so much.

Into this, Jesus adds his own prayer teaching. It is intimate, like to a parent. It is simple. In Matthew’s version of this teaching, Jesus contrasts his prayer he teaches with the “heaping up of empty words” by religious authorities. So he means it to be for everyone... this is the prayer of the people. It is repetitive.

One thing we need to cover is that Jewish life and religion had a regular daily practice of prayer. First in the temple, connected to the pattern of daily sacrifice in Jerusalem... later in communal worship in other locations, and finally spread out to the diaspora after Jesus and the destruction of the temple. These were ritual prayers, often incorporating the psalms, just like we do. It was a communal, and regular practice.

How you pray, and what you expect that prayer accomplishes, has a lot to do with who you think God is. And who you think God is will tell you a lot about how you read these teachings of Jesus. Because most of us probably learned those first prayers of our lives to a God that reminded us more of Santa... giving presents we put on our list... and many of us gave up praying when it felt like the phone line to the North Pole had gone dead.

If you read these two little stories too quickly, you can miss the nuance. You can read that Jesus asks we persist in prayer... and I want to hold out that he clearly *does want that*, but not so God will let out a holy *oh, I guess* and respond. Indeed that’s his whole point of the teaching, to contrast the story with how God will respond. The man woken up in the middle of the night by his neighbor takes some holy nudging to get out of bed. *God* surely then is already on the case. Our persistence is so that God continues to work on us.

We can read Jesus as saying that God will always give us the things we ask for. A fish, and not a snake. An egg, and not a scorpion. But I need to confess something before you about my prayer life:

I don't know about you, but I have, in my life prayed for a whole bunch of egg-shaped scorpions through the years. Jesus says, ask and the door will be opened... but, "Let's Make a Deal"-style, I also admit I have gone knocking on some terrible doors.

We can pray—sometimes many times a day—for our daily bread, but we have to acknowledge that a lot of times we do not have hankerings for that which sustains life. We can admit that Pope Francis probably has the translation right... that we need to ask God to “save us from temptation” because we have never needed to worry about God “leading” us there... we have always found it on our own *just fine*.

We can, just like me in the last few months... fail our own sense of our prayer lives. We can feel like prayer is unequal to the task of the world's injustice, or our own despair, simply our own schedules and business. We can feel like we don't even know how to pray in the face of the violence of the world, the depth of needs. We don't know what to ask for.

All of which is quite honestly built on the ridiculous idea that I or you are the only parts of creation that won't require any transformation in order for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven... that we're just waiting for God to go ahead and get to spackling up all *those other people*.

But Jesus insists... keep coming back after that daily bread. The apostle Paul will say, “pray without ceasing.” Because the gift that is most on offer is not a cheap answer to a cheap prayer... the gift that is on offer is the presence of God's Holy Spirit even in times of injustice, of despair, of futility. The gift that is on offer in the life of prayer is that we will be transformed. Maybe not as fast as we would like... I am always frustrated that the one time I went running didn't feel as smooth and easy... and didn't have the results on my health that I would like.

The real answer here is *how much more than those simple decisions of good things to offer* God will offer. As we grow and practice our prayer life, it seems like maybe the point is not that we will have faster download times of God delivering exactly what we

request... but that we have deeper understanding of those things which will actually give us life... and find that God has already been moving us towards them.

What I take as the *practice of prayer* that Jesus teaches, then, is that it is a pathway to discerning the things we should ask, the doors that we should knock on, the food that will sustain—rather than harm us. The practice shapes us to receive the gifts of God that have already been given, answered, set before us as a meal. The practice helps us discover who is our neighbor, and how do we listen for God, and even... *how should we pray?* Just as Jesus has been teaching these last few weeks.

In the fall, I'm going to invite us all to create a little space in our lives for prayer *when we are not in this room*. We'll create a small prayer practice that we can join in together from our homes... and see what we notice about these gifts of the Spirit. Until then...

May you be blessed, in your praying... in your asking... in your hungering... may you find the space to receive God's Spirit in your life. In doing so, we may be changed, and the world may be changed, and all that is may be changed, into God's realm of peace. Amen.