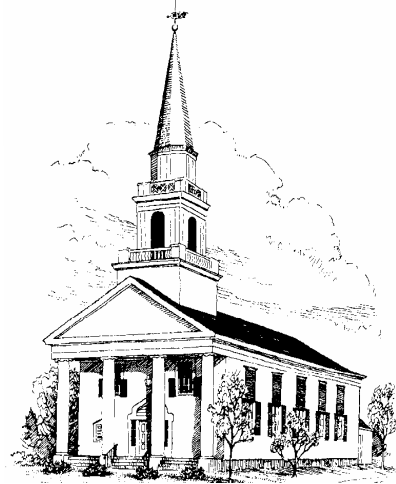


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from July 29, 2007
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“Ask, Seek, Knock”

Scriptures:
Colossians 2:6-15
Luke 11:1-13



Today we have two scriptures that are quite straightforward in their focus – both passages from scripture for today are quite practical in their application and quite inter-related. Our reading from Colossians can be summarized quite succinctly with the words *make Christ central in our life*. Our reading from Luke is also equally direct: approach God in prayer—*ask, seek, and knock*—make God central in our life and tap into the power of the Holy Spirit. Both of our readings for today then really help us focus on the power of the Trinity and the unique ways in which we can be in relationship with all three features of this power.

Luke tells us about how the disciples approach Jesus after observing him in a time of prayer and they ask him quite directly to help them with their prayer life. Prayer—that funny, peculiar activity that we probably all engage in, at some time or other, that we may not talk about much, and that we probably don’t really understand at all. At least I can say that about my prayer life.

Let me begin by saying I do not consider myself an expert on prayer. In fact, I’d have to claim that I’m only just above a rank beginner (on some imaginary scale of praying prowess). I have a small sign in my office that says: *Life is fragile, handle with prayer*. That perspective on life does resonate with me. I know that my own life can only be described as a daily walking in prayer. I also know that I’m still learning about prayer. I want to be sure that you don’t hear me telling you what to *do* here this morning. Rather, I hope you hear me invite you to consider and reflect upon your own prayer life. Let’s consider this morning how prayer might be a gateway to God.

Henri Nouwen suggested in one of reflections on the Christian life:

We have become children of an impatient world to such an extent that our behavior often expresses the view that prayer is a waste of time.

(Nouwen in *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Spiritual Life*)

There may be folks among us here this morning who think of prayer time as a waste of time. Let’s face it—there’s not much in this world or this culture (except when we take official “vacation times”) that give us permission to waste our time. In many instances, we are increasingly expected to *use* our time in multiple ways at all times. Think about it. Few of us simply watch TV anymore—we also knit prayer shawls, go through our mail, riffle through catalogues or newspapers. We don’t just read in silence—we also have music or the radio on. We don’t just drive a car—we also listen to books on tape or talk on our cell phones. Multi-tasking is the norm for many of us.

The whole idea of spending time with the Holy One, *wasting time*, as Nouwen suggests, in this

vaguely unsettling thing we call prayer, is a strange and oddly counter-cultural thing to do in this 21st-century secular culture we live in, isn't it? Spending time in silence, alone with God, is not the norm. Yet our Scriptures and our faith are premised on the idea that our most important focus for life is making Jesus Christ, God and the Holy Spirit central to our lives. Prayer time is spending-time-with-God time.

Marjorie Thompson has written:

Prayer is, first and foremost, an encounter and a relationship with God. Like any personal relationship then, it cannot be forced or manipulated but must develop out of mutual freedom. Like any personal relationship, it requires time spent in each other's presence to become acquainted – time freed from any agenda other than discovering and enjoying the companionship of the other.

(Weavings magazine, *Wasting Time with God*, March/April '89)

We know that it takes time and intentionality to develop a relationship with anyone. We know that we must spend time with our human relationships for them to strengthen and deepen and move beyond the superficial. It doesn't work to say to ourselves, "Yes, I want to get to know that person better" and then not carve out time and space to get to know and develop a real relationship with the other. We know that human relationships take time to develop. Why would we ever imagine then, that it would not take time for us to get to know and be in relationship with God?

In our text for today, the disciples ask Jesus: "Teach us to pray." Perhaps what they are really asking is: Teach us how to relate to God. Teach us what to *do* so we can better be related to the God with whom we want a deepening relationship. Teach us how to carve out time to *be* with God.

It is fair to say we do not always know where to begin or what to say when starting out a new relationship. If our faith journey is a lifetime journey of faith, then our prayer life also needs to be a life-long commitment. Our faith journey is really a life-long learning to be in relationship with God, with Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit.

Let's consider briefly what Jesus suggests about our prayer time. Jesus first offers us a sample of a prayer to use. Learning what to pray is different than learning how to pray. Learning the right words may still only point us in the right direction. We know that it isn't really about learning the right words to use as much as making ourselves into a house of prayer with a hospitable space into which we can truly welcome God. I know that one of my own biggest challenges is to carve out the time and the space to be with God.

Eugene Peterson's translation of the familiar words of the *Lord's Prayer* might help us hear them in a new way:

*Father,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil."*

(*The Message*)

Jesus first suggests that a petitionary prayer is an ongoing act of exploring and listening for God's will in our lives. He offered us a prayer that covers a whole range of life processes. The *Lord's Prayer* suggests we approach God from a very intimate place and suggests that God cares about each of us at the most basic levels. Jesus was clear that God is both our central focus and that we are God's central focus.

Jesus then follows his suggested prayer with a brief story that highlights both the practice of prayer and the basis for our prayers. Jesus points out that we need to continually *ask, seek, and knock*. These three words are offered as present imperatives, a tense of continuing action. Like the parable story that follows the prayer, where the friend keeps on knocking at the door persistently, our task is also to continue asking, to continue seeking, and to keep on knocking.

If prayer is indeed a gateway to God, then if we don't knock at the gate, how will God know what we need? If we don't ask and continue to seek, how can God help us? The promise implicit here in this text is that if and when we continue to ask, we will continue to receive; if and when we continue to seek, we will continue to find; if and when we continue to knock, we will continue to have doors open unto us. Prayer is then a life-long process of asking, searching, knocking and listening as we grow in our relationship with God.

Of course, the ongoing and difficult reality for each of us is that what we will receive, what we will find, how and when we will find the answers we seek, that will all happen in God's good time. We cannot expect to know how God will respond or when God will find the right time for the answers to become clear. Our task is to trust that God will respond in whatever time or space is the right time.

And I believe that is the crux of the problem we so often face in the process of learning to pray—we want answers now! We want solutions right away! We expect results immediately! We can become quite impatient with God when God does not appear to answer our prayers when and how we expect. We can become quite upset with God when our prayers appear to go unanswered.

Some have suggested that the supreme petition in all of the Bible appears at verse 13 in our Lukan text for today:

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

(NRSV—Luke 11:13)

Eugene Peterson's translation might also be helpful here:

Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This is not a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing—you're at least decent to your own children. And don't you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?" *(Message – Luke 11:10-13)*

Much of our prayer life may involve asking God for favors. God may not give us all we ask for yet we are given the promise that God is always ready to give us God's best gift – the gift of Godself, the Holy Spirit, that can abide in each of us. Not only are we encouraged to ask for that gift, we are invited to be eager and ready to receive that gift. In spite of all our human failings and our misgivings, we are encouraged to invite God and the Holy Spirit to dwell in us.

We may be tentative about bothering God or disturbing God with our requests. We may think we find the door locked and believe that God is not home when we call for God. Jesus' parable suggest that we must be persistent and bold in our knocking and in our attending to the development of our relationship with God. We must knock loudly, as if we really mean it! (Note that in the parable, the friend serves the other friend, not because he was a friend, but because he was so bold. Boldness appears to get us somewhere in all of this!)

Some suggest that it isn't the intensity or the length of our prayers that matters. It isn't the form or the words we use. Rather, it is the regularity of our prayer that matters. If we truly want to develop a relationship with God then we need to spend time with God. We need to learn to love God and be ready for all that God offers us. It takes time to develop a relationship with God.

And let's not be too hard on ourselves. If we recognize we've fallen short in our prayer life we can always begin again! I appreciate what this writer says about prayer:

Prayer is not a test of character, an endurance contest, or a heroic task set before us.

God's grace and our response come together in prayer as surely as they come together in every other place in our lives.

Prayer and life must be all of a piece.

In the final analysis, prayer is paradoxically both something we learn to do and a gift given to us by god which we must receive.

(Roberta Bondi in *The Paradox of Prayer*, Weavings, March/ April 1989)

Someone else once said,

Prayer is not a substitute for action.

Prayer is an action for which there is no substitute.

(Quoted by Marjorie J. Thompson in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, 1995)

Let us continue to seek to be in relationship with our god! Amen.