

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
July 25, 2010
Luke 11:1-13

One of the things I love about preaching in this congregation is that it never feels like lecturing to an audience, and it so often feels like participating in a lively conversation with friends who are all actively engaged in the conversation, all adding their thoughts, questions, prayers, stories, and experiences of God. A few weeks ago in the Bible study about Martha and Mary, some folks were talking about a comment I'd made in a sermon about the fact that when someone asked Jesus a question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus asked a question in response, and then told a story that changed the way this person looked at the whole issue. And one parishioner asked, "Are there any places where someone asks Jesus a question and he just gives them a direct answer?" Her question intrigued me, and as we continue to read through the gospels it is an excellent question to keep in mind. And the next question would be why does Jesus give a direct answer or why does he not?

There is a partial answer to the parishioner's question in today's gospel reading. Jesus was praying, and when he finished, one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray." And Jesus says, very directly, "When you pray, say, 'Father, hallowed be your name...'" and gives them a prayer. Strictly speaking, this is not a case in which someone asks Jesus a question, because "Lord, teach us to pray" isn't really a question; it's a request. Still, the direct and immediate answer Jesus gives them suggests that this time what they're asking for is right on target. It's exactly what they need. "Lord, teach us to pray."

If there are times when prayer does not come easily to us, we can follow the disciples' good example here. In the times when prayer does not come easily, each of us can bow our head and say simply, "Lord, teach me to pray." And the wonderful thing about bowing your head and saying, "Lord, teach us to pray" is that when you say it you are already praying. God is already teaching you to pray. If you ever feel a bit distracted or frazzled on a Sunday morning before the church service begins, you can say quietly, "Lord, teach me to pray" and it would not surprise me a bit if God used the prayers of that Sunday service to teach us to enter more deeply into prayer.

“Lord, teach me to pray” is a good prayer for those who feel like beginners at the whole prayer thing. It’s also a good prayer for those who have prayed for years and might be lulled into taking prayers for granted.

The writer Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian, but he makes some observations about a small detail in the Episcopal worship service:

“In the Episcopal Order of Worship, the priest sometimes introduces the Lord’s Prayer with the words, “Now, as our Savior Christ hath taught us, we are bold to say...” The word “bold” is worth thinking about. We do well not to pray the prayer lightly. It takes guts to pray it at all. We can pray it in the unthinking and perfunctory way we usually do only by disregarding what we are saying.

“Thy will be done” is what we are saying. That is the climax of the first half of the prayer. We are asking God to be God. We are asking God to do not what we want but what God wants. We are asking God to make manifest the holiness that is now mostly hidden, to set free in all its terrible splendor the devastating power that is now mostly under restraint. “Thy kingdom come on earth” is what we are saying. And if that were suddenly to happen, what then? What would stand and what would fall? Who would be welcomed in and who would be thrown the Hell out? Which if any of our most precious visions of what God is and of what human beings are would prove to be more or less on the mark and which would turn out to be as phony as three-dollar bills? Boldness indeed. To speak those words is to invite the tiger out of the cage, to unleash a power that makes atomic power look like a warm breeze.

You need to be bold in another way to speak the second half. Give us. Forgive us. Don’t test us. Deliver us. If it takes guts to face the omnipotence that is God’s, it takes perhaps no less to face the impotence that is ours. We can do nothing without God. Without God we are nothing.

It is only the words “Our Father” that make the prayer bearable. If God is indeed something like a father, then as something like children maybe we can risk approaching him anyway.”

(Frederich Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*)

Buechner is right. We can do nothing without God. And that puts us in an odd position when we get to the section of this prayer that parishioners have asked me about more often than all the other parts of this prayer put together: “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” Several different people have asked me the same question: “Does that mean that God will not forgive us if we haven’t forgiven everyone else?” My answer is “If God’s mercy were limited by human beings’ ability to forgive, we’d all be in big trouble. So we do the best we can, and we rely on God’s enormous mercy to cover the rest.” I believe that. Still, I don’t want to dismiss lightly the connection between God’s forgiveness and our own.

You all know I love the Episcopal Church, but there is one point at which my Presbyterian upbringing emerges. Since we are among friends here, I will tell you that nowhere in scripture does Jesus ever say, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The word “trespasses” doesn’t appear anywhere in scripture. Jesus always talks about the forgiveness of sins or debts or both. As it appears in Luke, “Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.”

Jesus compares how we deal with sin to how we deal with money. And Jesus is right. We do treat our interactions with other people in much the same way as our financial transactions. We talk about someone “owing” us respect. We are willing to “invest” in relationships, but we expect other people to hold up their end of a “bargain.” We are willing to give other people respect, kindness, love, and we expect them to give us respect, kindness, love in return—in exchange. If they don’t, it feels as if they are not giving us our due, as if they owe us something. It feels as if we have been cheated out of something.

When someone hasn’t treated us the way we think they should have, our natural impulse is to show them the balance sheet, to tell them what they owe us, to tell them they ought to pay it to us. They ought to give us that respect, that kindness, that love, because they owe it to us. And if they still refuse to pay, our natural impulse is to tell other people about how we have been cheated by this person, to show them the balance sheet in which we have paid them the amount we were supposed to and they didn’t fulfill their end of the bargain.

Nobody likes being cheated out of something. But when we are on our deathbed, looking back over our lives, will the goal of our lives really be to have achieved a balance sheet that comes out exactly even? Will we want to say that the amount that we have given to other people and the amount that we have received from other people is the same: no more, no less?

The tricky part is that there are some people who simply can’t pay what we think they ought to. *Whale Rider*, the movie we saw on Thursday night was a good example of that. It took place in a Maori village in New Zealand. The grandfather, Koro, came from a long line of Maori chiefs, and he had very definite ideas about what the next spiritual leader for the next generation of the Maori people would be like. His first son, his second

son, and his granddaughter all love him, and they all want him to love them. But they do not fit his idea of the way the spiritual world works, and so he has nothing to give them. His emotional pockets are empty when it comes to them. He's broke.

He is so convinced that he knows the way the spiritual world works, that the new spiritual leader is the firstborn son of the firstborn son. He is so convinced that he understands the stories of the ancestors. So he cannot see the way his granddaughter gravitates to sacred objects, the skill with which she learns to use the sacred stick, her uncanny ability to dive deep into the ocean and find the sacred whale's tooth when no one else can. Even symbolic objects such as the rope which represents the spiritual strength of their community, are objects that work in her hands, but not in his. He cannot see the way that when she chants the spiritual chants, sacred animals, even whales, respond to her. She doesn't fit his ideas about spirituality because she is a girl, and so every time she responds to her spiritual calling he scolds her, rejects her, shames her, pushes her away. She could easily keep a list of all the things he ought to give an innocent child who is his own granddaughter, all the things he owes her but does not give. But she doesn't. She simply continues to love him, against all odds. At the very end of the movie, when she has almost died, he finally realizes that he's been wrong and asks her to forgive him, but that request is possible for him only because she has forgiven him already.

When we look at forgiving our debtors, the important thing to remember is how rich we truly are. We have plenty of love to give away. God gives each of us treasure chests overflowing with love. If we give someone respect, kindness, love, and they do not pay us back, what do we do? We can be angry with them. We can chase after them insisting that they pay us what they owe us. We can complain to others about what they owe us and haven't paid. But the success rate for an emotional repo man isn't really very high. So a different option is that we can also just shrug our shoulders and say well, that love is already given away anyway. It was a gift. Even if it never comes back, there is plenty more. Our resources of love, respect and kindness do not run out. The people who don't pay us back might be broke or bankrupt, but we have a limitless supply of love, respect, and kindness, so that doesn't have to be a problem.

By the time we are on our deathbeds, our goal is not to get out of other people more than we gave, our goal is not to come out even. We're not in this life to make a profit or to balance the ledgers. Instead, God allows us to be multimillionaire philanthropists.

Without God we can do nothing. But the good news is that there's nothing we have to do without God. God has infinite riches, which are free for the asking. When we ask God, "Lord, teach us to pray" we are bold to say the prayer Jesus taught us. Because when Jesus teaches us to pray, Jesus teaches us to love. More than that, Jesus gives us the love that we give to others. It takes humility to pray this prayer, and guts. It takes humility and guts to pray, "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" because we open ourselves to actually letting God forgive our sins, and we open ourselves to allowing God's love work in us so that we forgive everyone indebted to us. Jesus pays their debt to us, just as Jesus pays our debts to God. And even after those debts are paid, Jesus keeps giving us more and more and more. Does Jesus ever just give people what they ask for? Yes. And much more.