



From the Pulpit: July 24, 2022
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Luke 11:1–13

To Bless the Space Between Us, VI: Desires

This Summer at Kenilworth Union we're using the revised common lectionary to study the ministry of Jesus that comes to us from the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." So he said to them, "When you pray, say:

'Father, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'"

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion? 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!"

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Does anybody here ever feel like Lois from *Family Guy*? Remember Stewie? "Lois, Lois, Mom, Mum, Mum, Mommy, Mum, Mom, Mommy..." Children's needs and desires seem incessant, infinite, and inescapable. They are always asking for something.

Or maybe you feel like Penny from *The Big Bang Theory* when Sheldon comes knocking on her door—AGAIN! "Penny, Penny, Penny, Penny..." I'll bet you

didn't know that two blockbuster television shows took their inspiration from a parable by Jesus.

Because what this story teaches us is to pray like Stewie and Sheldon. Ask for anything and never quit.

A common Galilean patriarch receives a guest after midnight. First-century Palestinian protocol forbids you to turn him away or to leave him unnourished. Your pantry is bare. So of course you knock on your neighbor's door to borrow a loaf of bread and a jug of wine.

Galilean homes in Jesus' day were small, simple, and square—one room, 600 or 800 square feet with a raised sleeping platform where everybody—Mom, Dad, and the kids—piled in together—and a little stable at the back for the donkeys, cows, chickens, and sheep, or whatever.

A knock on the door after midnight means chaos for everybody including the donkeys. You tell the knocking neighbor “NO!” but he won't take no for an answer. He keeps knocking like Sheldon until you give him what he needs. That's what prayer should be like, says Jesus.

But then Jesus shifts the metaphor from neighbor to father, which just amplifies and reinforces his point, doesn't it?

“What father among you,” he asks, “when your child asks for a fish will give him a snake.” Fish and snakes resemble each other, you see; they're both scaly and shiny. Jesus goes on, “What father among you,” he asks, “when your child asks for an egg will give him a scorpion. A balled-up scorpion with claws and tail retracted up looks like an egg, you see.

And then Jesus says, “Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened for you.” Well, just so, right? The sleeping neighbor eventually opened the door to the guys who knocks on his door after midnight.

After all, why does Jesus tell this little story? He tells it to illustrate and explain The Lord's Prayer which he's just taught to his disciples. And what's the first word in The Lord's Prayer? That's not a rhetorical question. Somebody tell me, first word in The Lord's Prayer: Father.

We are not praying to a drill sergeant. We are not praying to a prison warden. We are not praying to an implacable, screaming football coach. We are not praying to the fierce, intimidating bureaucrats at the government agency when we're trying to get a license or a permit or something. We are praying to a Father.

A father's **job** is to provide good things for his children. That is his *raison d'être*. That's what he **lives** for.

“A father's job is to provide good things for his children. That is his 'raison d'être'. That's what he lives for.”

One Bible scholar nailed this little parable squarely when she said, “When we pray, we are pushing on an open door.”¹ Get it? Pushing on an open door? Knock and it will be opened to you, says Jesus, but we don't even have to **knock**. We just push on the open door.

Years ago, I buried my friend's 90-year-old mother. The whole family adored her. They told me, “She would always think of ten reasons to say ‘Yes’ before she said ‘No.’”

Isn't that wonderful? It is, because we all know someone who thinks of ten reasons to say ‘No’ before they say ‘Yes,’ and those people are no fun. According to Jesus, God thinks of ten reasons to say ‘Yes’ before God says ‘No.’

Is that your experience of God? Is that your experience with prayer? Not always, right? I have some tough questions for Jesus on this parable.

Friday night the Toronto Blue Jays beat the Boston Red Sox 28–5 at Fenway Park. 28–5! That's a baseball score, not football.

For the Red Sox, that game was apocalyptic, just one preposterous disaster after another. It was like an episode of *The Walking Dead*. The whole Fenway crowd was in shock, silent except for gasps of horror.

¹ Meda Stamper, “Commentary on Luke 11:1–13,” *Working Preacher*, July 24, 2016.

A harmless pop-up lands safely between home plate and the pitcher's mound while inches away three Red Sox stare blankly into space.

A Blue Jay lofts an embarrassing, broken-bat, lame duck blooper that lands just inside the right-field line and it turns into a bases-loaded double.

The Boston centerfielder loses an easy-out fly ball in the lights, and it lands way behind him, and turns into an inside-the-park grand slam. How many inside-the-park grand slams have there ever been in the history of baseball? 28–5!

For me that baseball game feels like a symbol for the last two years in America. Everything that possibly **could** go wrong eventually **did** go wrong. We can't do anything right, we're getting hammered, and it's 28–5. The Canadians are doing fine, thriving even, but the Americans are getting clobbered.

Still we keep knockin'. We keep praying, because when you haven't got a prayer, you've still got a prayer.

Yesterday we buried Connie Kilner Watson. She died two years ago, but we just got around to saying goodbye yesterday. Connie was Gil Bowen's secretary here for 14 years ending in 1991. During those 14 years the membership at Kenilworth Union doubled.

Connie's faith was unyielding and legendary, even in the face of serial, serious, significant sorrows.

Connie's son John spoke at her funeral yesterday and told us about a plaque she kept in her kitchen for decades. When she died, John took it and placed it in his own study. It reads, "Pray anyhow." Even if it's 28–5, we pray anyhow.

The great Kirk of Scotland preacher at the University of Glasgow Professor William Barclay said, "There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. The answer we get may not be the answer we hoped for, but even when it is a 'No,' it is the answer of God's love and wisdom."²

Remember we are not praying to a drill sergeant. We are praying to our Father, and he always thinks of ten reasons to say 'Yes' before he says 'No.'

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I've told you many times about my hero Brian Doyle. Brian comes from a large Irish brood, and he is one of the most pious Catholics and one of the best pray-ers I know anything about.

Brian served as Editor of the magazine *Portland*, the quarterly journal of the University of Portland in Oregon. He did that for 27 years until 2017 when he died of a brain tumor at the age of 60.

Brian says "As a parent, my first prayer was tears." When he and his wife Mary were young, they had trouble conceiving, so they went to a doctor, who told them that they would never have children together. Mary and Brian left that doctor's office speechless and stunned, and they walked to their car where they wept inconsolably.

Well, Brian and Mary took Connie's motto as their own: "Pray anyhow." And over the years, God blessed them with three wonderful children.

Sometimes prayer **works**, and you have three wonderful children even when the experts tell you—you can't. Sometimes prayer **doesn't** work, you pray to live to a great old age, but you end up dying of a brain tumor 30 years too soon.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, in *The Daily Bible Study Series* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, revised ed. 1975, first pub. 1953, p. 146.

Maybe Brian had an inkling that the end would come too soon, because he says,

Lately, unexpectedly, now and then, I will find myself in tears for what seems like no reason at all; and I know it is because we were blessed with children, three of them, three long wild prayers; and they are the greatest gifts a profligate Mercy ever granted shuffling muddled me...

And so, my children, know that it was for you that I was here, and for you I prayed every day of your life, and for

*you I will pray in whatever form I am next to take. Lift the rock and I am there; cleave the wood and I am there; call for me and I will listen, for I hope to be a prayer for you and yours long after I am dust and ash. Amen.*³

“Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.” Sometimes it’s true. Sometimes it’s not. Pray anyhow.

³ Brian Doyle, *One Long River of Song* (New York: Little, Brown, 2019), 222–226.

—Prayers of the People— The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Holy God, we give you thanks for this season of sunshine and recreation where we are renewed by the sights, sounds, and taste of summer. We awake to the light glimmering and the peaceful sound of waves lapping on the shores. We linger at picnic tables with feasts of ripe local tomatoes and the tenderest of sweet corn, remembering again the sweet taste of the earth’s harvest. We end our days delighted at the flurry of fireflies with their steady, pulsing glow and the sweet lullaby of crickets. We give thanks to you, O God, for these simple pleasures which gladden our hearts.

When we overlook your gifts, distracted by the busyness of our lives, renew our awareness of your abundant blessings. Keep us ever mindful of the concerns of our neighbors. Enfold us in your peace, as we entrust our cares to you:

We ask this morning for relief and safe shelter for Europe and southern portions of the United States facing record heat. And we hold Chicagoland in our prayers after a weekend of heavy rains and severe storms.

You know what we seek before we ask and so we pray for the peace of the world, and especially

those who live under the rule of tyrants, where conflict leaves grocery shelves empty, and too many innocent lives are lost in war.

We pray for the earth and her stewards, who care for abundant and life-giving gifts. Keep us mindful of our use of air, water, and natural resources. Let the dry rivers and lakes be filled and the wildfires extinguished with fresh rain. Turn our hearts to care for the migrating Monarchs and the graceful manta rays moving through the oceans depths.

You know what we seek before we ask and so we pray for all in need of your healing mercy, for all who suffer from illness, injury, abuse, and addiction. Draw close to the grieving, meet us in our sorrow, soothe our hurts.

In silence, we bring to you our burdens and the burdens of those we love.

Holy God, overwhelm us with your love, embolden us to knock at the door of your grace, that we might love and follow you with all our heart, mind, and strength. In the name of Jesus Christ.

Our Father... Amen.