

Holmbury and Wotton

Trinity 6

Luke 11:1-13

As I recall my own life of prayer, prayers I have heard, and conversations I have had about prayer I can't help but wonder if the snack dispensing machine isn't our primary teacher of prayer. Think about it. We put in the correct change, make our selection, and get what we want. "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." So we offer the coins of our wants and needs, our beliefs, and our good behaviour. We tell God what we want and expect to get what we asked for.

All that works fine until it doesn't. Snack dispensing machines are great until they take your money but give you nothing or give you a crunchie when you selected a KitKat.

Look how we respond when that happens. We get mad. We push the button again and again. We hit or kick the machine. We tip it side to side. We did our part and expect it to do its. It's not so different with prayer. Some will get angry. Some will feel hurt or betrayed, lose faith, even leave the church.

I don't have a lot of people coming to ask me, "Why was my prayer answered? Why did I receive exactly what I asked for?" I know prayer is answered. Sometimes we ask and receive, search and find, knock and the door opens, but that is not their concern. They want to know why they asked but did

not receive, why they searched but did not find, why they knocked but the door never opened. We all do.

I prayed hard one Thursday night, about 8 years ago as I drove home drove. I prayed with words, silence, and tears. With each phone call and update my prayer became more desperate. More coins. Push the button again. "Please, please, please Father." Let my mother have peace, and a bit more quality time. "Ask and it will be given you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you."

She died a short time later.

That's not just my story. It's your story too. It's the story of everyone who has ever prayed. We've all lost our money at least once.

I don't know why some prayers seem to be answered and others seem to go unanswered. I don't have any good answers or explanations but I have heard some really bad ones;

"You didn't pray hard enough." "You didn't have enough faith." "You were asking for the wrong thing." "It's all a mystery and someday we'll understand." "Everything happens for a reason." "Something better is coming."

I can neither believe nor accept any of that. That is nothing but an attempt to bolster a snack dispenser machine understanding of prayer. We've got to let that go. It's wrong. It hurts people and it perverts who and how God is.

When I hear those kind of answers and explanations I can't help but remember another man praying on

a Thursday night. He prayed with words, sweat, and blood. “Please, please, please Father.” They crucified him the following afternoon. Ask. Search. Knock.

I don’t understand how prayer works but I know this. It is not about the coins. It is not a mechanical process. It is not a transaction. It is not the transmission of information to God.

In the midst of not knowing or understanding maybe the most and the best we can do is to echo that disciple’s request, “Lord, teach us to pray.” We are always beginners, always learning to pray.

Jesus’ response is not an explanation of prayer or how it works. He does not offer a formula or magic words. He does not give us the correct change for

the machine. Instead Jesus teaches about who and how God is. “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

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.”

God is holy and we are his divine children, holy sons and daughters. That’s a given, a reality, before we even open our mouths and before we ever offer our coins or make a selection. The relationship already exists. That’s how Jesus begins his teaching. Prayer is about relationship and presence. We’re not telling God something that God does not know.

We are reminding ourselves of what already is, always has been, and always will be.

That relationship means that our life, our existence, our very being, comes from our Father. Jesus speaks of that as daily bread. We are too often convinced that we are or must be independent and self-sufficient. Prayer reminds us that we are “not self-sufficient.” We ask each day for our daily bread. That does not mean we are deficient but that our sufficiency comes not from ourselves but from God. It means that God sustains and nourishes our life. That’s another way of talking about relationship and presence.

Those lines about forgiveness, ours and others? Again, that’s about relationship and presence, with God and each other.

If prayer, as Jesus teaches it, really is all about relationship and presence then there is only one answer to every prayer.

God.

I don't just mean God answers our prayer but that God *is* the answer; God's presence, life, love, beauty, generosity, compassion, forgiveness, wisdom, justice, mercy. God gives God's self as the answer to our every prayer. Jesus tells us that. If you, he says, know how to give your kids good things "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit."

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of prayer is that sometimes we just want to offer our coins and push the button. We don't want God. We want something from God. We want God to change our circumstances.

While God can and sometimes does change circumstances, I am increasingly convinced that God, more often than not, changes us. God's self-giving sustains, nourishes, strengthens, empowers, emboldens, and enables us to face the circumstances of life. We do so, sometimes with joy and gratitude, other times with pain and loss, but always with God. On my better days I know this and that's enough. On those other days? It's "Lord, teach me to pray."

Amen.