



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Real Prayer and the Gift of the Holy Spirit

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 24, 2016
The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost—Based on Luke 11: 1-13*

[Knock, knock, slow]

[Knock, knock, knock, fast]

[Knock knock, knock, faster!]

B: I can't believe this! [sigh] Who in the... [cracks open the door and the knocking stops] Frank?

F: Hey! Buddy! Sorry to bother you...

B: You'd better be sorry! Would you keep it down! Lily and Jessie are in bed and they've got a big day tomorrow with the harvest and all.

F: I know. That's why I'm here! Because of the harvest, I've got some friends of mine from shul in Tabgha, picking up some work where they can. But, gosh, they didn't let me and Marsha know; they just showed up, and bakery day is tomorrow. We don't have a slice of bread to give them.

B: You don't have any bread?

F: No! You know me. I love that stuff. That's why I married her. Marsha makes the best bread.

B: But this is the problem, Frank. We go over this all the time. If you don't save any bread, you won't have enough when things like this happens.

F: I know, I know. I'll do better next time.

B: No. I don't think you will. Again, it's late. The kids need their rest. I'm not going to root around the house for you. Go home, Frank. [Shuts the door] I swear it must be midnight! [He settles back into bed]

[Knock, knock] [Knock, knock, knock, faster]

B: [B opens the door] Frank, will you quiet down! You're not getting it. You should've saved your bread.

F: Listen, Buddy, I need three loaves. I can't put out my friends. I just can't. What will they think?

B: Well, you're putting me out! And Lily and Jessie.

F: C'mon! Three loaves. I need this, Buddy.

B: No, Frank. Final answer. You made your bed, so sleep in it, and for God's sake let me sleep in mine! [Shuts the door]

[Knock, knock] [Knock, knock]

B: I can't believe this! Honey, wake up, where did you put the bread? Yes, I know what time it is! Just, where's the bread? Thank you.

[Knock, knock]

B: [B opens the door] Frank....will you keep it down!

F: Buddy, oh, my gosh! Is that three loaves?

B: Don't call me Buddy. I'm not your Buddy. Take the bread and get out of my sight!

F: Oh, thank you, Baruch! You are the best!

B: And you're the worst. Scram, before I take it all back!

This is my version of the parable that Jesus tells his disciples when he teaches them what we call “The Lord’s Prayer.” This is the parable that is meant to undergird the practice of praying like Jesus, this sense that whatever prayer is, it should involve a kind of shameless persistence.

Jesus told another parable like this, later on in Luke’s Gospel, where a widow keeps demanding that a judge set right an injustice against her. Now, the widow has no power in this situation at all. But the judge, who happens to be a corrupt judge, gives in because he is so exhausted by the widow coming to him again and again and again. Steady persistence is a tool that the small can use to challenge the great and mighty and get their needs met. It’s just the way the world works.

And so Jesus wants to encourage his disciples to rest in the conviction that if enemies and frenemies are moved by that kind of persistence, how much more so will God who knows the number of hairs on your head, knowing you better than yourself and loving you like a loving parent, how much more so will that persistence pay off?

Persist and it will be given you. Ask and you shall receive. Knock and the door will be opened unto you. Well, this doesn’t sound like an encouragement, this sounds like a guarantee!

But, “Wait a minute,” you might say! “I think I’ve knocked plenty of times, Lord, at that door of yours, asking for something important. And I don’t remember that door of yours opening. In fact, it’s still shut.” But this is not asking for an ache in your leg to go away, or asking for a promotion, or for your candidate to win, or anything like that. Look at the end of the passage. The upshot is the guarantee that the Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask! This is the promise.

Well, you might say, “I wasn’t asking for that! I wasn’t knocking for that!” Well, we have to see that if we ask for something, God is only going to give us something good. This is part of what Jesus is saying in the final parable of the reading. Would a father give a snake to a child that asks for a fish? Would a father play a prank on a child like that? Or would a father give a child a hard-shelled scorpion when he asks for an egg? No, a father wouldn’t do that for a child. The snake would bite; the scorpion would sting. This is the way the world works. So why wouldn’t we trust that heaven works the same way, or even better?

God only gives good gifts. Not curses. Not more power or wealth than someone else. Not super powers. God gives only good gifts, that of the Holy Spirit. The one gift that everyone wants, even if they don’t know it, even if they think they want something else. I think the flip side of this parable is true, too. If we were to ask for a snake, or ask for a scorpion, if we were to ask for something that can’t be or shouldn’t be or would hurt us, God wouldn’t give that either. If we ask in prayer for a scorpion, God will give us an egg. If we ask for a snake, God will give us a fish. Similar, but harmless and nourishing. God does not dispense curses, even if we were to ask. God can only give blessings. God can only give the Holy Spirit, because that is who God is.

I have a parable of my own, in this style. You know that every time real estate changes hands, a friendly lawyer is there. Well, every time something real happens, a real connection, a real exchange, the Holy Spirit is there. As we sing sometimes: “God is love, and where true love is, God Godself is there.” What Jesus is after here is real prayer, prayer that is the answer to prayer, for it puts us in communion with God; it gets us in a place where we can receive the Holy Spirit. Real prayer is grounded in the reality that there is another who knows me better than I know myself, and by turning myself over, by praying “thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” in that surrender, in that availability, our life becomes what it was meant to be. So, odd but true, I say it again: Prayer is the answer to prayer, even though the checklist of wants in my head may be totally ignored. This is the revolutionary upshot of the Lord’s Prayer: Jesus says that the Father will give the Holy Spirit, but, normally, we don’t know we are asking for that, but that is what we are asking for, and receiving. So when Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray, he not only teaches them what to ask for, but teaches them what they will receive: The Holy Spirit. God’s Very Self.

There’s another name for the Holy Spirit, a legal term, the Advocate. The Defender. This is the giver of the gift of prayer, and also what you receive in prayer. Look closely at the only thing we actually are asked to do in the Lord’s Prayer. The rest is about heavenly, transcendent things. Asking for God to be put first, praying for God’s purposes to be fulfilled, and for God to deliver us from trials. Look at the only thing we are called to do. Look! It is the same thing God does to us.

“And forgive us our sins,
As we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.”

Forgiving: that is our job now. This is our job in this world. To forgive and be forgiven. That’s it. To allow God to advocate for us, and have the strength to advocate for other people, so that we might receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (the Advocate), which is the only gift worth having.

There is something fundamental to Jesus' ministry that approached the problem of "un-forgiveness" in the communities he graced. And one of the things he did most was forgive sins, and heal disease and uncleanness (which were thought to be because of sin). Lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors colluding with the Roman dictator, the people killing him on the cross: "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."! Can you imagine? Just magisterial!

He knew that when you see the mess of this world, the typical answer to the problem is that the mess hasn't been condemned enough. That it hasn't been rebuked enough. This is not altogether wrong. Moral standards are needed, and you don't want to cop out with a live-and-let-live attitude that dissolves all goodness and all truth.

And yet, fundamentally, the problem is un-forgiveness. The problem with the world is that there are too many unforgiven people running loose in it. There are too many people in debt to one another. And we are called, in the heart of the Lord's Prayer, to do something about it.

And so he forgave sins. He sent out his disciples to forgive sins. And our only job in the Lord's Prayer is to receive that forgiveness from God and forgive others when they are indebted to us. We need to do both.

If we are not up to this work, well, I don't know if it would be fair to call ourselves Christian. Yet many have poisoned the meaning of the word by making condemnation the hallmark of their so-called ministry, drawing dark power from fear and accusation like any demagogue in our history (or in our present).

For we are not in the small, petty universe of getting and spending. We are in a boundless multiverse of receiving and giving. And this isn't receiving and giving any old thing. This is the receiving and giving of the Holy Spirit, the receiving and giving of forgiveness, connecting us with God, revealing the heart of God in our heart, and revealing our kinship to the world. We are not living in a field of good guys and bad guys, but in a home of brothers and sisters; we are all in this thing together, bound to God and bound to one another. And that holy bond, that Holy Spirit, is the answer to every prayer.

May this prayer be on our lips, and in our hearts, and in our lives. Amen.