

Be Prayerful Sunday, 11/8/20

I have a confession. I'm just a little creeped out by large spiders, perhaps even a little bit afraid of them. I know there are many rational reasons not to be afraid of spiders, especially in Minnesota, but I think what gets me is the way they can just appear out of thin air, creeping along so quietly out of dark corners and crevices. When Jesus used this illustration two-thousand years ago, he actually referred to a scorpion, but those critters are a little scarce at this latitude, so let's roll with the spider we find in *The Message*. There may be some of you who would love to reach out and hold this large spider, so let me help you understand what Jesus was saying when he said, "If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider?"¹ Both of those things might be good sources of protein, but only one of them would be considered appropriate to serve your children for breakfast. By the way, if you're one of those people with strong feelings about spiders, go ahead and post about it.

The parable actually starts with a man asking his neighbor for bread, but the back story begins in Luke 11:1, when the disciples said to Jesus, "Master, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples."² This isn't a parable about arachnophobia after all, but a parable about prayer. I find it really instructive that the man knocking on the door of his neighbor's house asks for bread and asks for the bread on behalf of someone else- his unexpected houseguests. Let's just dwell on the bread for a moment. It was just a few verses earlier in this passage that Jesus gave the disciples the Lord's Prayer as an example of how to pray, saying "Give us each day our daily bread."³ So there's a couple of things we know already. Jesus is teaching about prayer, and not diet, so the "bread" here could equally apply to just about anything that people need on a regular basis to sustain life. I for one need a daily dose of WiFi in order to work and stay connected with friends and family. It's daily bread that we pray for because we're to trust in God's provision for each day, just as our ancestors depended on God for mana each day while wandering in the wilderness. So even in the very first verse of this parable, there's a great deal of freight behind the words of Jesus.

If there's any kind of prayer that we most naturally begin with in our faith life, it's the

¹ Luke 11:12. *The Message*.

² Luke 11:1. *Ibid*

³ Luke 11:3. NIV (2011).

kind of prayer where we ask God for something that we know we need. But as we mature and become more aware of the needs of others in our lives, we can discover the joy of petitioning God on the behalf of someone else. When the man in the parable asked for bread for his guests, he was knocking on a door, a great metaphor for prayer. Are there people that you lift up before God regularly in prayer, knocking on God's door on their behalf? Our church prayer chain is one great way to be connected in that way with our church community. And by the way, if you're ever feeling reluctant to share a need for prayer on the church prayer chain, then think about this. By making your needs known, you're blessing all those people who have a need to grow in prayerfulness by knocking on God's door for you!

It's easy to get lost in the details of a parable, so let's focus on the main point of the parable. Jesus never used this particular image, but I'd say Jesus is instructing us to pray in the same way that a woodpecker goes after insects- with persistence and focus. Have you ever heard a Pileated Woodpecker working on the side of a tree, or seen the perforated aftermath? Woodpeckers get their daily bread through perseverance until they get what they need. They don't knock on a tree once, but many hundreds or thousands of times. In the same way, Jesus tells us, we should keep on asking God for what we need.

There's been a history of confusion over this and similar teachings of Jesus concerning prayer. Surely Jesus isn't teaching us that all we have to do is keeping knocking away and we'll eventually wear God out and get whatever we want. That would be reducing God to the vending machine that we talked about earlier or the rotten tree bark in this picture. The key here, as it often is in parables, is found in the very last verse, where Jesus says, "And don't you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?"⁴ In other words, God will faithfully provide us with our daily bread, including what we really need to be spiritually alive, but don't assume that what you want is necessarily the same as what God has determined you really need.

This daily, persistent nature of prayer is also reflected in the Apostle Paul's first letter to his young apprentice, Timothy. As you listen, see if you can imagine how Paul would

⁴ Luke 11:13b. The Message.

define “daily bread” for himself, for Timothy, and for other followers of Jesus. I’m reading from 1Timothy Chapter 2, verses 1-8 in The Message paraphrase.

{Read 1Timothy 2:1-8, MSG}

I love that passage, especially the first verse: “The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know.”⁵ Growing in prayerfulness requires that it become a first course of action for us rather than an afterthought. Notice what happens when we do as Paul suggests. Praying “first” requires that we acknowledge our relationship with God first. That’s what prayer is, an active communion of our spirits with God. While it’s true that prayer can be “powerful and effective,”⁶ the fundamental basis of that power is in our reaching out to God, the author of every blessing. But that communion with God is not the end of the miracle of prayer. Paul goes on to write, pray “for everyone you know.” And I would add, pray for those you don’t know as well!

Something happens to our hearts when we pray for other people. Our hearts become softer, more tender, more loving- closer to the heart of God. When we pray for those we know, our attitudes can be softened toward them and our relationships improved. And when we pray for those we don’t know, our worlds become larger, and the kingdom of God comes nearer.

There’s no better way to increase in prayerfulness than to simply pray more often, so I’ve written a new prayer for us to use for the remainder of this worship series. No one prayer can do everything, and so this is more of a centering and grounding prayer for us in these days of anxiety rather than an intercessory prayer for others. Use this as a beginning to your prayer time, and then bring the needs of others before God. We’ll pray this in unison together each Sunday that remains, but my hope is that you’ll bring this prayer with you into your homes, your workplaces, and your travels. You should have received a copy of the prayer with your BUMC Weekly Connection, but you can also find it on the homepage of our church website. Please join me now in this unison prayer.

Good and Holy God, during this time of adversity and scattering, may we be reminded of who you are and who you’ve called us to be. In times of despair, may we learn to cling to

⁵ 1Timothy 2:1. The Message.

⁶ James 5:16

the hope we have in Jesus Christ, ever more deeply. In times of division, may we remain united by our faith through the powerful presence of your Holy Spirit.

In times of exhaustion, may we grow stronger in the face of adversity, each of us earnestly seeking to help each other. In times of wavering faith, may we continue to grow in our love of God and neighbor. In Jesus we make our prayer, the one who suffered, died and was raised to new life, in whom we trust these days and all days. Amen.

Here's your homework for the week. Remember, I'm not asking you to do all of these things, but please do at least one of them to take a positive step forward in growing in prayerfulness. I encourage everyone to make the commitment to pray the prayer we just learned every day for the next week, and better yet, continue all the way through to our Consecration Sunday on November 22. If it's more natural, you can substitute "I" for "we" when you're praying that prayer on your own.

It could be that you've never committed the Lord's Prayer to memory. This is a great time to do that. Why not find someone to partner with in your prayer, either someone in your pod or someone you can call or Zoom every day? You could even combine this with one or more of the first two ideas I suggested. Many people find it easy to let the day slip by without praying, so try setting an alarm as a reminder to pray, even if it's only for a couple of minutes. Another thing you could try this week is the habit of praying on behalf of other people before you pray for your own needs. And as always, if none of those things are right for you, then come up with some other creative way to grow in prayerfulness in a way that you haven't tried before.

Please take some time now to reflect on how you can grow in prayerfulness this week. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



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