I Kings 19:9-13a; Matthew 7:7-11

Prayer

So much has been written about prayer, and there are so many teachings on prayer running throughout the bible, it is impossible to cover all there is to say unless you are willing to stay a lot longer than normal this morning. If I could get a show of hands of those of us willing to do that. And there we have it.

Today’s sermon is on the matter of prayer we find in Matthew’s gospel, on asking, seeking, and knocking. The passage where it is found is part of the larger discourse where Jesus is on the mount, where he also taught the Beatitudes, the Lord’s prayer, and many other teachings. Some scholars believe it is part of a collection of sermons Matthew remembered. It’s interesting that in this passage, Jesus doesn’t use the word prayer, but it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it, that this is precisely what he is talking about--asking, seeking, knocking. Sometimes the word prayer can be so confusing; it almost seems that in this passage, it is easier for Jesus to use different words. There was a lot of confusion in his day when it came to prayer. There’s a lot of confusion today.

Just before offering the words to the Lord’s Prayer, he tells them, “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” There were others who loved to hear themselves pray in front of other people to get recognized, praying for the wrong reasons. When asked how to pray, Jesus offers what is actually a very short prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, without all the fluff and pomp, a very basic prayer that you and I easily memorized as children.

So, in today’s passage, instead of using the word prayer, he simply tells them to ask, seek, knock, because if you ask, it will be given you; if you seek, you will find; if you knock, the door will be opened. Knowing what we need before we ask for it, Jesus tells us to ask, seek, and knock. God wants us to communicate. Prayer.

I cannot tell you how many times I have prayed, how many times I’ve been asked to pray, to pray for someone, or for some occasion, or for something. I am certain it has been many thousands of times. Prayer before meals at the table, before I go to bed, with those who are troubled, at graduations, at the commissioning of a ship, evening vespers at sea, a service of prayer, funerals, weddings, baptisms, worship, bible studies, by myself, countless times, for countless reasons. I’m sure the same is true for all of us.

And every time I pray, it is a humbling experience, because in the act of praying, I realize my utter dependence on God for everything I have, for everything I am. Every breath, every meal, every opportunity, every assurance of God’s grace and forgiveness, God’s love, the love he gives each of us to love each other, all owes a priceless debt to the Giver of all good things. Even people who have no practical understanding of God or religion experience moments of awe and wonder that if put into words would sound very much like a prayer.

According to Jesus, if you ask for good things from God, you will receive good things from God. As we would not expect a stone if we asked for bread from our parents, or a snake when we ask for a fish, all the more will we receive good things from the Author of goodness.

When I was very young, my parents taught us kids how to pray before bedtime. Mom taught my sisters and Dad taught me. Every night, my sisters would pray this prayer: “Dear Jesus, thank you for a nice day. Help me be a sweet girl. Pray in Christ name, Amen.” Dad would come into my room. I’m sure my mom could have taught me how to pray just as well. But it was our time together, just us guys, and I’m glad he and I focused on praying the Lord’s prayer as my bedtime prayer. Something about praying to be a sweet boy didn’t quite do it for me, but the Lord’s Prayer was a good fit.

Point is, people pray in all kinds of ways for all kinds of reasons. Whatever the reason, we can turn to God and pray about it.

Jesus spent long hours in prayer. Most of the time he prayed, we know nothing about; it was private time between him and the Father. The prayers we do read about in Scripture reveal an intimacy and depth in his relationship to God such that his will and God’s will were one and the same. There was no distinction. Even when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, even though he prayed that God would remove the cup of death he was about to drink, Jesus nevertheless prayed “not what I want, but what you want.” In other words, even in the face of his own cruel death, Jesus prayed that his will would conform to the Father’s will. It was in harmony with the prayer he taught his disciples: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Given that Jesus prayed all the time, and encouraged his disciples to do the same, how then do you and I pray? I suppose there are as many answers to this question as there are people. And there are all kinds of prayers. In the bible, and in church, there are prayers of blessing, prayers of supplication, personal requests to God, prayers of petition, praying on behalf of others, prayers of praise and thanksgiving, prayers giving glory to God, prayers of confession, intercessory prayers, asking God to step in and help someone, lamentations, sharing your troubles with God, prayers for healing, prayers for justice, prayers for wisdom and discernment, prayers of illumination, to show us the way, public prayer, private prayer, prayer in worship, pastoral prayer (that’s me!), prayer of consecration before communion. Bedtime prayers. Morning prayers. There are all kinds of prayers you and I pray.

Some of us pray standing with hands in the air. Some pray kneeling with hands folded. When he was grieving his own death, according to Luke, Jesus knelt down and prayed. The gospels of Mark and Matthew record that he literally threw himself on the ground, and prayed. Apparently, you and I can pray in any posture we prefer. There is no right or wrong way. So, given this, how do we pray?

I’ve heard some people pray with such beauty and grace you can almost hear the angels sing. For others, the words come hard. And one is just as devout a Christian as the other. How then do we pray?

Jesus tells us it’s not about the words. It’s not about how eloquent you are. It’s about your relationship with God. This is why Jesus told his disciples that even though God knows your every need before you ask it, ask it anyway. It’s about staying in touch with God, because when we do, we know where we stand with God. We know God’s will for our lives. We know God’s love, even when we are going through hard times. Without that connection, your world can look a lot darker than it is.

Jesus says ask, seek, knock. If you’re not sure, ask. If you need something, and it’s important, and you think it is line with God’s will, ask. If you need direction in your life, ask. If you want to know how to respond to someone or something, ask. Just ask. Doesn’t matter what words you use, just ask. And in the asking, you find the answer. Sounds so plain and simple, we almost hesitate to do it. We’re either afraid God will answer (you know, be careful what you ask for), or we’re afraid God won’t answer. Maybe I don’t have the right words. Maybe I’m not good enough. Maybe it doesn’t work that way. But Jesus says, ask, seek, knock, and it will be given you, you will find it, the door will open.

Of course, we may not exactly get what we ask for. A man told me he put all his paycheck in the Powerball and didn’t win. He said, “But I asked God to let me win. I need the money!” I asked him if he learned anything. He said, “Yeah, I learned never to do that again.” I said, “Well, if you really need money, God taught you a good lesson. Don’t throw away what you have!”

God knows what we need before we ask, but sometimes we don’t know what we need until we ask. But in the asking, we eventually learn, and receive something good from God, instead of a stone or a snake.

Born the son of slaves in 1864 and orphaned as a baby, George Washington Carver was adopted by former slave owners of his parents. Taught to read and write, he attended Simpson College, having been rejected from Highland University in Kansas because of his race. He eventually received his Master’s degree from Iowa State as the first black student, and later became an expert in botany and agriculture. A devoted Christian, it is said that he once prayed that God would show him the secrets of his universe, to which God replied, “Little man, you’re not big enough to know the secrets of my universe, but I’ll show you the secrets of the peanut.”

In time, professor Carver developed over three hundred uses for the peanut alone, hundreds other uses for the soybean, the sweet potato, and other plants. He further developed the concept of crop rotation, restoring nitrogen in the soil to improve crop yield, after repeated plantings. From his knowledge of the peanut, Carver opened a new chapter in modern farming that is with us to this day. And this is what God gave him in answer to his prayer.

There are some requests we ask God for, and God overwhelms us with answers we never expected. Other times, the request is quite specific. In December of 1944, it was decided that the Third Army, led by General George Patton, would make the move beyond the Siegfried Line to invade Germany and break the back of Nazi forces. They needed three ingredients to succeed: the know-how, trained forces, and good weather. They had the first two. It was the weather that would spell the difference between victory or defeat.

Patton sent for the head chaplain and told him he needed prayer for good weather, and not just the chaplain’s prayer. He needed every soldier in the Third Army to pray for good weather and success. Shortly after that meeting, the chaplain produced what came to be known as the Patton Prayer. It was distributed to all the troops of Third Army, over 250,000 copies. He also sent a training letter to the 486 chaplains of Third Army saying: “Urge all of your men to pray, not alone in church, but everywhere. Pray when driving. Pray when fighting. Pray alone. Pray with others. Pray by night and pray by day. Pray for the cessation of immoderate rains, for good weather for Battle. Pray for the defeat of our wicked enemy whose banner is injustice and whose good is oppression. Pray for victory. Pray for our Army, and Pray for Peace.”

And you know what? Despite the weather forecast, those prayers were answered with six days of clear weather for planes to fly and do their thing, speeding the end to a bloody war and the defeat of Germany.

Our God answers prayer, Amen? Perhaps not always in the way we can understand, maybe not always in the timeline we would like, but God answers prayer, sometimes dramatically, and often in ways we don’t expect.

The prophet Elijah was at a low point. Jezebel had vowed to kill him, so Elijah fled for his life. He was righteous for the Lord and for all the good that did him, he fled for his life. He was at his wit’s end. He asked God to take away his life. That’s how bad he felt. God tells him to go to the mountain to wait for him to pass by. So, there’s Elijah, waiting for God, waiting for it to happen, whatever it is, perhaps the fulfillment of his morbid prayer. A great wind comes and breaks mountains in half, but God’s not there. A huge earthquake shakes the foundations, but God’s not there either. A roaring fire sweeps across the land, but again, God’s not there. Events where God has dramatically appeared in Israel’s past don’t seem to be working this time, at least, not for Elijah.

After all this, scripture says there came the sound of silence. The New Revised Standard Version translates the Hebrew as “a sound of sheer silence.” I think of the muffled sound after a heavy snowfall, where everything is dead quiet, a rather loud silence, if you will. And in that extreme silence, Elijah hears the faint whisper of God’s voice speaking to him. He answers Elijah in his distress, tells him what to do, and gives him the way forward, and answers his prayer. The answer’s not what he expected, but it was a far better answer than what he asked for.

You and I never know for sure how God is going to answer our prayers, but Jesus assures us that God surely will. I look back on my life and see all the twists and turns, the fortunes and misfortunes, the incredible opportunities and missed opportunities, the many second chances, the good things I’ve done, the mistakes I’ve made, the lessons I have learned, the people I have loved and who have loved me, sometimes despite myself, and without a doubt I know that God answers prayers. He’s answered mine in wonderful and mysterious ways, even here, in Monroe, in FEBRUARY!!!

Sometimes it seems our prayers don’t get answered. Sometimes it seems that the sound of sheer silence lasts a mighty long time. On his last night on earth, Jesus prayed he might be spared the suffering and death that awaited him. Surely, we think, God would listen to his son. And in his prayer are countless other prayers people have prayed, prayers that don’t seem to be heard, at least, not in the way we wish. But God did hear his son’s prayer, and he hears ours. God’s ways are not our ways. And the death of Jesus, which seemed like a terrible defeat, God turned into a marvelous victory for Jesus, and for all of us.

Ask, seek, knock. God will answer, for God is good, all the time, and all the time, God is good.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we come to you in prayer. We lift our deepest joys and concerns, sometimes with sighs too deep for words. Who else have we to turn to? You give us the good things we need. We pray for our church here in Monroe, that we will grow in our mission to spread your gospel. We pray for our denomination as our general conference delegates meet in St. Louis this week. Shine the light of your wisdom as they seek your will, your goodness and your truth. And as we go forth this day, help us to trust you at all times, with all things, to stay close to you, to stay in constant touch, even as Jesus did, who lives and reigns with you now and forever. Amen.