



*Prayer and Blue Sky  
Luke 11:1-13*

*Seventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sunday, July 28th, 2019*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

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*Text: (After Jesus finished praying), one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” (v. 1)*

There comes a time in many lives when we do not feel like praying. Our understanding of who God has turned upside down. This happened to me in the late winter months of 2006. I had just moved to Peoria to become the senior minister of First Federated Church. My wife, who was the Executive Presbyterian, encouraged me to move closer to Peoria because my parents were quite ill, and I am an only child. My first day as senior minister at First Federated Church was February first.

My parents were in worse shape than I had believed. I teased them that on a good day between the two of them they made up three-quarters of a person. Shortly after moving to Peoria my mother was admitted to the hospital. On Sunday, February 19th, I visited her before coming to church. After supper that evening, I had a “feeling” that I needed to make another visit. I learned long ago to take these “feelings” seriously.

I spent about four hours with her before returning home.

In the early morning hours my wife and I were awakened by the telephone next to my side of the bed. “Mrs. Krummel has taken a turn. You need to come down.”

I called my father, picked him up at his home, and we drove silently in the night.

When we arrived my mother had already passed from this reality into the next.

We didn’t stay long. There was no need to. There was nothing we could do.

The next few days were a blur of activity. There were calls and arrangements to be made. Toward the week end of the week my father and I agreed to meet at his favorite little restaurant for breakfast. When Dad didn’t show up and didn’t answer the telephone I had a pretty good idea of why. After calling my wife I drove to my parents’ house and found my dad. He had joined Mom peacefully during the night before.

While I continued to function, I was spiritually “dry” for about six months.

I didn’t feel like praying. I felt empty. There was an arid space in my “soul”.

I am not the first to experience such periods in life. Mine only lasted for about six months, but Mother Theresa’s lasted for about 40 years.

In a book of her journal and letters published after her death Mother Theresa wrote about her own dryness of spirit. “I have no faith,” she wrote in an undated letter,

“I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd my heart and make me suffer untold agony.”

None of us are immune to this experience. In the last few weeks, a high school graduate turning into her own driveway on a sunny and warm summer afternoon is struck from behind by a distracted driver trying to give his crying daughter a soothing pacifier. The lives of two families are forever changed.

A son, goes out for a morning jog. He was finally getting his life in order. He was going to enroll in culinary school in a few weeks. Suddenly, the morning quiet is broken by the crack of gunfire. With three chest wounds he bleeds out in front of a neighbor’s house.

A member of the class of 2018 at a local high school is shot and paralyzed as she sits in the backseat of the car on an evening drive.

More medical tests and maybe even a biopsy is needed. The list is endless.

If you haven’t experienced such dryness of the soul, you will. And the Sunday School faith of childhood suddenly seems irrelevant, or as I like to call it, “freezer burned.”

Richard Foster, in his book on Prayer, called such times the “Prayer of the Forsaken.” (Prayer: Finding the Hearts True Home Chapter 2, p. 17)

One of the most influential guides in my early spiritual journey was C. S. Lewis.

He often wrote about his own “dry experiences” with prayer. To a Sister Penelope he wrote: “I always tell people not to bother about ‘feelings’ in their prayers, and above all never try to feel.” (Yours Jack: Spiritual Direction as quoted from “What If I Don’t Feel Like Praying” by Dr. Timothy Smith, “Water from Rocks Ministry” blog, June 19, 2017) In a later letter he explained what he meant. “(Prayer) is the act of the will (not feeling)...(It is the act) that God values, rather than the state of our emotions--the act being what we give to (God).” (ibid.)

In times of spiritual drought we must remember that God is not absent or aloof or even unconcerned. God’s eye is on the sparrow, as the old hymn reminds us. God cares for you and me. But like the clouds overhead that block out the blue sky above, so the trials, tribulations, joys, sorrows, and concerns of life block the blue skies of God’s Presence in our lives.

In our gospel lesson an unnamed disciple saw Jesus praying “in a certain place”--a common place--and asked, “Lord, teach us to pray...” Jesus’ prayer was simple. “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.” A mere 38 words in length. There’s nothing magical about this prayer. It’s not an incantation for this is not a Harry Potter world.

As I said earlier, there are times in our lives when we do not feel like praying.

But prayer isn't about feeling. It's about discipline, a habit like brushing your teeth. Prayer is a willful act that we do even when we do not feel like praying. That is why the spiritual "offices of prayer and traditions of the faith are so important. They provide us with words when words cannot be found within ourselves. And this is what the parable in today's gospel lesson is about, isn't it?

Jesus followed his prayer with a parable. Suppose you have a friend, he said, and you go to him at midnight asking for three loaves of bread because an unexpected guest arrived at your door. Would your friend not give you bread, even if it was inconvenient or in the middle of the night? Or suppose your child asked for something to eat. You would feed him, wouldn't you? You wouldn't give him something poisonous.

"So if you who are evil know how to give good things to your children, why do you doubt God?"

Richard Rohr, a Roman Catholic Franciscan friar, ecumenist, and spiritual director noted that prayer is not transactional nor is it about changing God. Rather, it's about changing us by opening our hearts, minds, and bodies "to be receptive to God's already and always presence" in our lives. (My emphasis) I'm going to repeat that. Prayer is not transactional.

Prayer is not about changing God. It is about changing us by opening our hearts, minds, and bodies to be receptive to God's already and always presence in our lives.

To God be the glory. Amen.