



SUNNYVALE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

728 W. Fremont Avenue • Sunnyvale, CA 94087
408.739.1892 • www.svpc.us • info@svpc.us

From the Pulpit

Sermon Series ~ *A Long Road in the Same Direction: Jesus' Journey Towards Jerusalem*

Sermon ~ *Prayer—Jesus Style*

The Rev. Karin Kennedy Hejmanowski ~ March 20, 2011

2 Chronicles 7:14

Luke 11:1-13

Today's scripture reading that we'll get to in just a moment is on prayer. I have my suspicions that there are various responses to the title of a sermon that indicates it's about prayer. Some people are excited—you love to pray, you see God in the little details of life, you see God answer prayer, and you're always eager to learn. Some people may be intrigued . . . it's always good to hear more about spiritual disciplines. You know you can listen and decide afterwards whether you think it's a fit for you. And still others think, "oh no! It's going to be a guilt trip." You already feel like you don't pray enough, you're worried it's going to be a message to pray more, you'll feel guilty for not praying enough in the past and leave feeling pre-guilt for the praying you won't be doing in the future.

I get emails daily from a website that exists to help people get and keep their homes sparkly clean. From clutter to clean. Each day there are suggested tasks that, taken alone, seem completely doable. I, however, am doing well if I open one of the emails each week, so as you can imagine, I'm always behind, as it were, according to that particular system. By most systems, really, but that's not the point today! But at the end of each day's suggested tasks, the email says, "You are not behind! I don't want you to try to catch up; I just want you to jump in where we are. O.K.?"

I love that! I really do intend to do better and be more consistent, but each time I jump in, rather than feeling guilty, I feel invited in to the experience. That's my hope for today. Whether you pray all the time or almost never, know that you are not behind—just jump in! And that grace can be extended as many times as it's needed.

Today's passage is indeed on prayer and it's teaching that comes from Jesus himself. Let's listen to the Word of God as it comes to us from Luke 11:1-14.

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "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." And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

There are really three sections to this. The first is one version of the Lord's Prayer. The other is found in Matthew 6 and is a bit longer and closer to the one we say every week. The second piece is a story of two neighbors in the middle of the night. And the third are some admonishments or truisms about prayer.

What I think is interesting in this pericope or passage, is the boldness that is exemplified in prayer. And it's true in each of the three sections.

The Lord's Prayer can, if we allow it to, can become rote. But it's really quite an audacious prayer. At the time Jesus was teaching his disciples to pray, which was the whole point of this prayer, they were fairly early on in their discipleship. When Jesus prays Let your Kingdom come, his disciples were picturing thrones and power and servants and gold and precious gems in crowns and scepters. Jesus, too, had power and servants in mind...but he and the disciples were to be the servants and the power all belonged to God and there was nothing about gold or crowns or thrones whatsoever. But regardless of which picture was held, the prayer is huge. The world as they knew it and as we know it is so far from being the incarnation of the Kingdom of God that the request was huge. And it's just as significant today. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done." And perhaps

we, like the disciples, forget that the coming of the kingdom of God will surely change our own lives and lifestyles.

Forgive us our sins...or as we and many others say, debts. That alone is more than a substantial request. To forgive our sins. There are those of which we are aware and many more of which we are not. And the outworking of our need for forgiveness required the death of Christ on the cross. That's a huge prayer!

In the story of the two neighbors, it's just a bit funny. One guy gets unexpected company, so he goes to his neighbor's house and asks for some bread. The neighbor calls back through the door that he won't do it. Now he mentions his kids being in bed as a reason. As a mom, I can understand not wanting to go through the bedtime routine again. And I certainly understand not wanting to get the kids out of bed, which may have been required in the small homes of that day. But the text goes on basically to say that the neighbor eventually relents because the man is so persistent. And so we are to be persistent in prayer. Why? Because God doesn't want to get out of bed? Because God is busy and needs to be nagged and reminded? Because God wants us to prove our sincerity? I think more that God wants to allow us to participate in the unfolding of a new reality and God wants us to maintain relationship with him as we persist in prayer. And God desires us to be sensitive to the Spirit, learning to discern when to keep praying and when to stop.

Each week in our pastoral prayer we pray in some way for the peace of the world and for those places that are plagued by conflict and war and disease. We pray not out of obligation, but because we understand healing and peace to be God's heart for our world. We pray with the confidence that God wants to accomplish these things and is active in ways we cannot see in those parts of the world. We continue to pray because we want to participate in what God is doing. And in our requests, we pray big, trusting that we are praying to a God Who wants to do big things in our world.

The final part of the passage is a command to ask, search, and knock, seemingly promising that we will receive that for which we ask, find what we seek, have the door opened to us (in contrast to the neighbor we just talked about!). Then it goes on to compare God to a father who will give what a child wants or even better...not giving a snake instead of a fish or a scorpion instead of an egg.

Now I think the invitation to ask for whatever we want needs some interpretation. I'm guessing that simply asking for a BMW will not cause one to show up in my driveway. But what is it that we might pray for with a purity of heart? If we pray with a purity of heart, then we should be bold and ask big.

Years ago I was facilitating an Alpha group—alpha being a program kind of like a Christianity 101 that's good for both those trying to learn about the faith and those who have been in the church for a long time. One of those in this particular group was a young man who had been part of our young adults group for a little while, but was still trying to figure out whether he believed in God. He wanted to, but mostly thought not. After a

teaching on prayer, he decided to pray for something that seemed completely impossible. If God could do it, then he would believe.

At that time the headlines were centered around these two Christian women that were being held captive in Afghanistan. Their death looked likely and even immanent. Their release looked, well, impossible. So he prayed with sincerity of heart, albeit with some doubt that God existed, or if he did, that he could make a difference, that they would be released. It seemed an audacious and therefore safe prayer. And so he went to bed.

The next morning he stepped outside to pick up the paper. He unfolded it and the headlines, in huge, bold print, read, “IT’S A MIRACLE!” The two women had been freed! He was incredulous. And his life has never been the same since.

Sometimes my prayers are innocuous. They seem anemic or safe. And I wonder why I hold back. Do I think I am in some way protecting God? If I don’t ask big, I don’t have to worry about ruining God’s reputation if God doesn’t answer as *I* ask? Am I protecting myself? If I don’t ask big, I can’t be hugely disappointed? Am I unsure that God will meet me in my disappointment? After all, what’s the risk? If God says no, often things just continue as they would be had I not prayed. If God says yes, woo-hoo!

And when we pray, we can pray with honesty. The psalmists sure did. They laid bare their hearts because they understood that God could handle their frustration, their anger, their disappointment—whether directed at God or at others.

Now let me point out the assumption that we pray in line with what we know to be God’s values. We pray for women to be released because we know that life is precious to the One Who created life. We pray for peace for the same reason. We pray for relationships to be restored because that is in line with the wholeness or shalom we know God desires people to experience.

So when you think about prayer this week. You’re not behind. Don’t try to catch up, just jump in. And dare to pray for the big things as well as the small. Pray for healing, pray for reconciliation, pray for peace, pray for the Holy Spirit, pray for. . . well, pray your heart. And let’s see what happens. Amen