

The Kingdom of God is NEAR, So Disciples are ... Accepted

A sermon for July 24, 2016

Luke 11:1-13

[Lansdowne UMC](#)

Now we come to the third week of talking about ways in which we as disciples of Christ can point the way to the reality that in Christ, the Kingdom of God has come near. We're using the acronym NEAR to help us remember that the great hope of scripture, God's rule over all creation, is not far off in time or in space. In Christ God comes *near* to us. And if God truly has come near to us, then nothing can ever be the same. This is news that changes everything.

So before we launch into the second half of this sermon series, let's remind ourselves where we've been.

The N in NEAR is for Neighbor. We talked about how God's grace toward us makes us see our neighbors, even our enemies, in a completely different light so that we can serve others from a position of humility rather than superiority.

The E is for Engaged. *Because* the Kingdom of God has come near, we can be Engaged in discipleship so much that we are overwhelmed by Christ, rather than by the cares of the world.

And now, the A in NEAR is for Accepted, because Jesus reveals to us that God accepts us and adopts us as children.

The scripture from Luke starts out with a very common scene: Jesus is praying. By my count this is the sixth scene in Luke's gospel where we are told that Jesus was praying. His disciples understand that this is a critical part of who Jesus is. And more, that if Jesus teaches them how to pray, the way that they pray will set them apart as his disciples.

And so Jesus responds with--- an incredibly surprising prayer, right!? What? You don't think it's surprising? Well, it's a little bit surprising, at least because it seems like Jesus forgot part of the Lord's prayer, doesn't it? What about "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!?"

Well, aside from the fact that Luke has recorded a shorter version of the prayer than Matthew did, the actual content of the prayer really would be surprising if we weren't so familiar with it. And the surprises start with the first word of the prayer: Father.

People had used parental images to talk *about* God before, but actually *calling* God, "Father," in prayer? Certainly that's much too familiar! We rush to point out that Jesus is God's Son, so of course *he* can call God Father. But, remember, this is how Jesus is telling his *disciples* to pray.

I'm sure you know that many of my colleagues in ministry shy away from calling God "Father." This is because they recognize that there are many people who have earthly fathers who don't in any way reflect the goodness of God the Father. Some among us actually do have the type of earthly fathers who give their children a scorpion when asked for an egg!

But do we really think this was any different in Jesus' day? That Jesus wasn't aware of this? That Jesus wasn't looking to heal this, too? In this very passage Jesus stacks up earthly fathers next to the Heavenly Father, and he judges earthly fathers as evil by comparison. And so Jesus addresses God as Father not because earthly fathers are perfect, but because the Heavenly Father *is*. And earthly fathers are judged against

this standard. And so I have to wonder, are we missing out on something by dropping the intimate name for God so quickly?

In all four gospels, there is only one time when Jesus addresses God using a name other than “Father,” and that is when Jesus hangs on the cross, having just said “Father forgive them,” and quotes from Psalm 22: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” This image of God as Father was central to Jesus’ prayer life with God.

It was also important to the early church. We know from the Apostle Paul’s letters to the churches in Galatia and Rome that from very early on in Christianity, Christians prayed to God as “Abba, Father.” And in both of these places **Paul says it’s the Holy Spirit that enables disciples to cry out to God in this way.**

And so I want to re-offer Jesus’ practice of calling God, Father. I offer it recognizing that I have an unpopular position in many circles. I offer it recognizing that my opinion on the matter comes from a position of privilege, as I myself am a father and I have a good earthly father. But I offer it humbly, because I sense that someone needs to hear it today. If it helps you, wonderful. If it doesn’t, we move on to the other surprises of the prayer.

I had a teacher in seminary who got off on a tangent describing prayer. She was using an acronym that you might have learned in Sunday School for different types of prayer: ACTS. Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (which means persistent asking). She went on to explain how the best prayers should have all of these elements, and tried to use the Lord’s prayer, line by line, as an example.

“Hallowed be your name. Well, that basically adoration.
Your kingdom come. Ok, that’s supplication, or maybe adoration.
Give us each day our daily bread. Supplication again.
And forgive us our sins. Huh, I guess that’s supplication too, maybe confession.
And do not bring us to the time of trial. I guess that’s supplication too.
Well, nevermind.

As my teacher re-discovered that day, the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples is basically 5 bold petitions to God.

1. God, sanctify your name-- make it holy-- hallow it, because there are lots of places where your name is cursed.
2. Bring your kingdom. Come and make things right because there is a lot of injustice here! We know that we can do things that point to your kingdom, but you’re the only one that can bring it to the world, to my community, to my heart. In the midst of all of the work that we do to anticipate the coming of your kingdom, Father, we ask you to actually bring it.
3. Give us our daily bread
4. Forgive us.
5. Don’t test us.

If this is what Jesus told us to pray, then we have to come to terms with the fact that we don’t ever *get beyond* asking God for things. We might pray in other ways too, but Jesus teaches us to never outgrow this child-like dependence on God. Jesus teaches us instead to cultivate it.

What we ask God for might change and mature to a degree. But Jesus' prayer prevents us from over-spiritualizing this. Jesus *could* mean a lot of things when he says we should pray for our daily bread, but it's most likely that we're praying for exactly what it sounds like: bread-- the food that we need for the day.

Jesus teaches us to assume the role of a children who have confidence in their Parent's ability to provide.

Jesus won't let God be dismissed to our refined spiritual sentiments.

Jesus teaches us to pray for the things we need, because God *accepts* us as children. And we can call God "Father" because God has drawn near to us as a perfect father to a child.

This is a surprise! Not that God is all powerful to give good gifts, or that we are sinners who are unworthy to receive anything from God-- although those things are true. The good news, the big surprise of Jesus, is that God has chosen to come near to us, as a Father to a child.

We have to remember this. I've known some people who think that it's silly, or disrespectful even, to bring *our* little problems before the God of the universe. That's not what Jesus teaches us. Jesus reveals to us a father who cares about the mundane problems of your life. Jesus teaches us to bring these troubles to God.

Trouble at home? Jesus says to bring it to the Father. Trouble at school? Jesus says to bring it to the Father. Trouble paying your bills? Jesus says to bring it to the Father. God *accepts* you! Bring your cares to your Heavenly Father.

Jesus' prayer pushes us to let God into every part of our life. The Father won't be put in your life's spiritual box, unable to hear about or have an impact on the things in your life that really matter to you. The prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples keeps our heads out of the cloud and our feet planted in the dirt.

Prayer would be a lot easier if it weren't like this-- if we didn't ask God for things. It would be easier because it would be less risky. I wouldn't really have to trust God. I wouldn't have to be dependent on God. I wouldn't have to risk being let down....

Because all of us have faced unanswered prayers. As the quotable C. S. Lewis says, "Every war, every famine or plague, almost every death bed, is the monument to a petition that was not granted." There are no easy answers for this. But when my prayers seem to go unanswered, I remember that Jesus himself experienced this. In the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified, Jesus essentially asked, "Father, can't we do it another way?" Jesus, of all people, understands exactly how much pain can come from a "no". Yet Jesus tells us to pray.

And in Jesus' case God's "no" to keeping Jesus from suffering really meant God's "yes" to a resurrection. Even though it's nearly impossible to see at the time, when God gives you a "no"-- Jesus teaches us to hope for something better than what you asked for.

But then again, sometimes we just quit asking, don't we? Do we pray a couple times for something, and then move right into despair and self-pity? Or do we keep taking it to God boldly, like the man who

shamelessly calls for his so-called friend to be a friend and help him fulfill the town's responsibility to be hospitable to a traveler.

We have so much trouble when there isn't instant gratification, and so little patience for shameless persistence. Jesus says keep taking it to God. Just keep on taking it there.

I know a lot of people who are skeptical of the power of prayer. Perhaps that's *why* they don't pray. But could it be that it's the other way around? Perhaps they don't pray, *therefore* they are skeptical of prayer. They give no opportunity for God to work in their life. Their hands are too full of bitterness and resentment to receive the gift that God gives. As St. Augustine said, "God gives where he finds empty hands." And it is prayer itself that empties our hands and gets rid of our pride and our self-righteousness that keep God from doing good in us. As Paul says in Romans, "He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with him?"

What *is* the best gift that God can give us? What is the true fruit of all of that shameless asking, seeking, and knocking?

Jesus says, "If you who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give [...what does he say? you expect him to say "good gifts." But he says "how much more will your heavenly Father give] the Holy Spirit[!] to those who ask him!"

We hit this point in the scripture, and it makes us rethink everything we've heard. Asking is indeed at the core of our prayer life. But the receiving might look different than we expect.

Jesus tells us to put ourselves in the position of children asking their Father for gifts. We hope with our *minds* that we are God's children, but we don't know it in our *hearts*. We know that we haven't done anything to earn it. But Jesus tells us to ask as a child asks a Father, and so, we ask, if not in faith, then at least in obedience. We make ourselves vulnerable to God and we shamelessly ask. And we keep on asking, seeking, and knocking with shameless persistence until God opens the door-- and reveals himself to be our Heavenly Father. God accepts us.

And when the door opens, we receive our gift-- the best gift that God gives. The Holy Spirit. And what does the Holy Spirit do? The Holy Spirit, Paul says in Romans and Galatians, is a spirit of adoption. And he says that it is the Holy Spirit that testifies together with *our spirit* that we are children of God.

We approach God persistently, hoping that we will find a loving Father, if for no other reason than because Jesus tells us to. And when we do God gives us nothing less than the gift of the Holy Spirit that lets us join the prayer of the early church, "Abba, Father!"

Through Christ, God comes near to us-- so near that the Spirit of the Father, the Spirit of Christ, comes into us and remakes us from the inside. And by this incredible grace, we begin to bear a family resemblance to our Father in heaven, so that others might be drawn to join God's large family.