

“How Do We Talk to God?”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
July 24, 2022

Luke 11:1-13
Colossians 2:6-19

How do you talk to God? Or, maybe I should just ask, *Do you talk to God?*

If I had the ability to instantly display the responses, I would have everyone in the pews text something they have recently talked to God about. What did your prayers say to God? For now, I will just ask those watching virtually, if you are comfortable sharing, please write in the comments something you have recently talked to God about.

I suspect that our answers can vary as widely as praising God for the sweet and tangy delight of a delicious orange, seeking God’s guidance for the future of the planet as climates rise... and asking God to curse that thing you stubbed your toe on. For me, any and all of these things could be woven into a day’s worth of conversation with God– in addition to the many specific people and needs that come to mind in my ministry with you.

Niveen Sarras, a Palestinian biblical scholar from Bethlehem whom I met in Chicago, where she pastors a church, notes that in Luke’s gospel and in Matthew’s gospel, the authors are sharing these words on prayer from Jesus to two different audiences. In Matthew, Jesus is speaking to a *Jewish* Christian audience. They had been taught to pray already; indeed, their prayers had ordered their days and nights for a lifetime, according to Jewish worship practices. In this telling, Jesus is advising reforms on prayer, so that it not be showy, or full of fancy words but empty in heart. Jesus warns about hypocrisy, so that we try to live up to the intentions we set forth in prayer.

In Luke’s gospel, the writer is writing for a *Gentile* Christian audience– people who may be learning to pray for the first time. In this version, which we heard today, a disciple asks Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” This audience is looking for some basics, we can assume.

Among us today, there are some who have been taught to pray their whole lives, and actually do it, some whose prayers have dropped away or become hollow, and some who are new to having a prayer life with God. Interestingly, the words Jesus offers in both gospel versions are nearly identical, and make up the elements of the Lord’s Prayer which we say each Sunday. In the early Christian church, believers were instructed to pray this prayer three times a day. If you do not know how to pray, and also if you do, the Lord’s Prayer is a solid place to start and to rely upon.

But we are also invited to leave the script for a more intimate talk with God. Jesus frames it as a talk with the closeness you have in family life: we can talk to God like a child talks to a parent. We can feel open in making our needs known to God, as a child would.

After spending time last week sharing a house in Florida with three generations of the Fowler family— including my dad and his wife, my three other siblings and a brother-in-law, and our 4 kids— there was lots of persistent asking. Can we get ice cream? Will you play in the ocean with me? Do you have some water I can drink? How about a taste of your beer? Can I drive the golf cart? Will you get me a bandaid? Can I have the first shower? And, for my teenage niece, “Can I take an evening walk with this cute boy I met on the beach?”

For some asks, the answer was an easy yes. For some, the answer was no, or some form of “do it yourself”-- to empower the kid to make something happen rather than waiting to be served. My niece did get the date on the beach with the boy she had just met, much to her uncle’s shock; with this niece about to start her first year in college, her mom decided she should be trusted with the independence to enjoy a very short beach romance if she wanted. The night ended well for my giddy niece, and overall, whether they got yeses or nos for their various requests, I think each child or youth left the week with some knowledge that they are listened to, valued, and loved. As for me and my siblings, our generation also left feeling reconnected to our father’s presence and love, after being distant for most of the pandemic. We don’t have much we ask for from him in our adulthood, but we *do* still need his presence and love. It is a pleasure now even to just sit in silence with him, and not say anything at all.

There is a parable in the gospel about persistence: a neighbor asking a friend for bread late at night because a guest has arrived— eventually they will get it, even if the door is locked and the children are in bed, if for no other reason than because their shameless persistence requires a response so the neighbor/friend can get some peace. We can also be bold and shameless in our approach to God.

But does Jesus’ instruction to ask, so that it will be given to us, seek, so that we will find, and knock, so the door will be opened to us, mean that we can treat prayer like a spiritual ATM? Does prayer mean that if we put in the time and faith, we get the answers we long for? And if God does not answer prayer, does that mean that our prayers weren’t said right, or we aren’t good enough, deserving enough, or faithful enough?

I don’t think so. I am convinced that prayer is not a currency that we trade in for favors from God. Rather, it is a language that helps us draw near to God and which helps us orient ourselves towards God’s love and desires. Prayer changes us, for sure, and I suspect it can also change God. Our vulnerability opens God’s heart and changes God, just as God’s experience in the human, vulnerable body of Jesus Christ changed God.

One of my sisters was adopted at birth. I call her my surprise sister, because we only learned of her existence 12 years ago, when my dad got a surprising Facebook message from someone who had just had her adoption records unsealed, and they had identified my dad as the father

who could not be found or notified of the adoption. My dad had a few years of adventure as a traveling, hippie musician, and hadn't realized that a visit in another generation to Florida, and perhaps another consciousness, had resulted in the birth of a child. A DNA test confirmed what my father couldn't remember. We all stepped cautiously in our first encounters; no one knew what the other wanted or expected; we were each curious but we didn't want to step on anyone's toes, and also wanted to respect the close and loving relationship she shares with the parents who raised her from birth. But this sister, Laura Jane, has become a beloved part of our family, too. Our lives are changed by her presence, for the better. Now we share vacation with this surprise sister and her two daughters, and what they have woven into my life enriches it greatly, and I know my dad and siblings agree.

I think many of us approach our relationship with God like that anonymous, absent being out there. We aren't sure if God knows about us or not. And if our existence is known, does it matter? We tread carefully, not sure what to expect, or if it's even okay to ask.

Jesus acknowledges that our earthly relationships sometimes disappoint us. They sometimes fail or do not show up or are even cruel— in Luke, he says “evil.” But God, on the other hand, has a constant care and an ever-present love for us. God will not deny us good gifts. These gifts do not always come as the end of suffering we pray for, or the job opportunity, or even an end to homelessness. So, what gift *will* we get when we pray? Jesus promises, “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!”

Perhaps, then, the most important thing our prayer can do is to unite us with the Holy Spirit. Maybe that way, our lives *become* the prayer, and God can use us to make it here on earth as it is in heaven. May it be so.