

Riverside United Church
11 August, 2024

Offered by - Jeannie Taylor

Scripture Reading: Luke 11: 1-13

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." ²He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." ⁵And 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; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷And 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.' ⁸I 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. ⁹"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. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If 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!"

Reflection: "Dear God... "

Two years ago, I took a 4-week course called "Spirituality in the writing of Lucy Maude Montgomery". It was delightful to reread *Ann of Green Gables* through a spiritual lens.

As the story goes, when Marilla concedes to allow the orphan girl to stay that first night, she tells Anne to kneel down and say her prayers. Anne replies, "Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray, I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd go out into a great big field all alone or into the deep, deep woods, and I'd look up into the sky, up - up - up into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there is no end to its blueness. And then I'd just feel a prayer." Then Anne kneels down and continues "Well, I'm ready. What am I to say?"

Marilla, a good Presbyterian woman, has never heard such a fanciful approach to prayer and is not sure how to respond. She was going to teach Ann "Now I lay me down to sleep," but it somehow seems too childish for this enigmatic free spirit.

Marilla tells her to thank God for her blessings and ask God humbly for what she wants.

Anne begins, "Gracious heavenly father, "That's the way the ministers say it at church, so I suppose it's alright to use it in private prayer, right?"

Ann continues

"Gracious heavenly father, I thank thee for the White Way of Delight, and the Lake of Shining Waters, and Bonny and the Snow Queen. I'm extremely grateful for them. And that's all the blessings I can think of just now to thank thee for. As for the things I want, they're so numerous that it would take considerable time to name them all, so I will only mention the 2 most important. Please let me stay at Green Gables, and please let me be good looking when I grow up. I remain,

Yours Respectfully,

Anne Shirley

Marilla is beside herself listening to this remarkable petition, and later tells her brother Matthew that Anne is next door to a perfect heathen. She vows to teach her the Lord's prayer the next day. As Marilla says goodnight, Ann calls her back. "I should have said Amen instead of Yours Respectfully, shouldn't I?"

I think both of Anne's prayers were appropriate, sincere, and from the heart. A prayer can be any way you are connecting with the divine. It can be a beautiful prelude, an interpretive dance, or a walk in the forest. For me at this time of year a prayer can be working in my vegetable garden in my sister's back yard, feeling the warm soil in my hands, inhaling the smell of the tomatoes and cilantro, and listening to the sound of the songbirds watching me from a branch of the neighbour's tree. Sometimes words are not necessary.

Did you grow up with prayers in your family home? I remember saying grace at dinner, but I don't remember my parents teaching me to pray before I went to bed. Do you remember a grace from your childhood? Our family grace was "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, what thou hast given us, for us blest."

Now our family custom is to mention what we are thankful for each evening when we say grace. My daughter who has Down Syndrome lives with me, and her middle name is Grace. She often hands me a note or sends me a text message to say what she wants to pray for at dinner. She finds joy in simple things, like a new flavour of herbal tea, and I find joy in her hugs and giggles, which are a huge blessing in my life.

Sometimes we may need help putting our prayers into words. When I became a Licensed Lay Worship Leader 9 years ago, extemporaneous prayer was one of the most difficult things for me to learn. It's one of the many things I admire about Rev. Paul, the way he can pray without notes.

In the gospel reading from Luke, the disciples ask Jesus for the words to use in their prayers. I can relate to that. It was common in those days for religious leaders to teach their followers formulaic words to say. Jesus gives them the words, which we now call the Lord's Prayer, but some scholars suggest would be better called the Disciples Prayer. The version in the gospel of Luke is shorter than the version in Matthew, and this passage is one of three, known as the triptych of Jesus teachings about living as disciples. The other two panels are the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of Martha and Mary.

The Lord's Prayer is recited by Christians all over the world in many different languages, and though some of the words may not be as relatable to us as they were to the disciples, it is a sort of sacred mantra that unites us in worship.

Jesus tells us to be persistent in our prayers. When we pray for a friend who is struggling, their needs become our focus, and we feel compassion towards them. When we say grace and thank God for our blessings, we take on an attitude of gratitude, which stays with us throughout the day. When we talk to God about our own needs, they become clearer to us, and sometimes we realize that we need to shift our priorities to focus on what really matters. I often find that when I pray about a problem at night, a solution often comes to me by morning.

Jesus goes on to tell the disciples, "Ask and you will receive," maybe not what you wanted but possibly what you needed. "Search and you will find" - if you are open to listening for God's advice. "Knock and the door will be opened." For some reason this made me think of Lucy, in the Peanuts cartoons, who would offer Advice for 5 cents. She had a little sign that said "The Doctor is In" when she was in her booth. The good news is God's advice booth is always open.

Ann Lamott, an American author, Christian and social activist, wrote a book about prayer, called "Help, Thanks, Wow, the 3 essential prayers." She talks about some of the "Greatest Hits" Prayers, we all may know and love, like the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm and the Serenity Prayer. Lamott calls these "prayers for special occasions". Sometimes it's comforting to repeat a familiar prayer, like the Lord's Prayer. But Lamott also says that prayer is an honest conversation with God. She believes that prayer reminds us that we are not in charge, that we cannot fix anything by ourselves, and that we must open ourselves to being helped by something beyond our being.

This week, I urge you to think about the different ways you can pray. Whether you are listening to music, working in the garden, walking the dog, or lying in bed, open your heart to the presence of God.

As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

May it be so!