

“The hardest thing” Luke 11:1-13

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” And 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 who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.”

And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs.

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him 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!”

Prayer. This is the topic for our reflection for today. And the reading from the Gospel according to Luke chapter 12 will serve as our text for these reflections. How do you feel when you hear the word prayer? What springs up to your mind? What does your conscience say?

Prayer... We can say that prayer is one more of these universal human experiences. Everyone prays. Literally everyone. Even when you converse with people who say they are not religious they may still say that they pray from time to time.

A few months ago, we hosted an arm-wrestling friend of mine. Great guy. He has no Christian or any religious background at all. He used to serve in Canadian special forces, and he did several tours to Afghanistan. In one of them it got really ugly, several of his friends were killed, he was injured as well. And can you guess, – what did he do in the heat of the battle? He prayed...

Why do people pray? Why is this such a universal experience? Two things. Or two deep senses, two facets of our human existence. First, even if we fight against this idea, we all realize that we are so limited in what we can and what we can't. Most things are out of our control. We can't influence them in the slightest.

The second is our knowledge of God. Sure, it may be obscured and partly unconscious, but we all have this sense built into us, that there is someone who is so much more powerful than we are, and to whom we could cry out in our despair.

As Christians we are commanded to pray. How do we do? I don't know about you, but I fail miserably. There are so many reasons why we fail. Often, we simply forget to pray. We don't trust that our prayers actually matter.

We don't believe that God actually hears us. We are concerned what others will think hearing us praying, how will we look, perhaps it is better to leave this praying business to "professionals", to pastors. But they are as hopeless as everyone else.

And even when we pray, our thoughts wander everywhere. We pray one sentence and five minutes later realize that our thoughts have been all over the place. We promise to pray for others, with good intentions, and then we forget about it.

I don't know about you, but I can easily relate to all that was said. And then we may feel guilty and disappointed with our prayer practice. We may want to be spiritual prayer warriors, but most of time we are more like spiritual failures.

If any of this seems at least somehow familiar to you, then what Luke has recorded for our sake is for you. You need to hear it and take it to the heart. For Christian prayer is very different. So, so different. Shockingly different.

To see how different Christian prayer is we will today reflect on three questions. Who do we pray to? How do we pray? And why do we pray?

Who do we pray to? We don't pray to someone we don't know. To some unknown cosmic force. To someone out there... whoever it might be. We pray to this God who has revealed Himself. But even that is not it yet.

We don't simply pray the holy God who is the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, and who is the Judge Eternal. This God knows our hearts, He is holy and just and almighty and He hates sin and no sinful man can come into His presence and live.

And that is who we all are. Meaning, on our own no one can appear before God in a pleasing way. Our sin evokes God's wrath, and not the desire to answer prayers. That's why we are not approaching our God on our own, but in a very unique way.

The disciples asked Jesus: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And 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 who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.'"

See what happened? Jesus didn't teach them how to pray or what to pray. Instead, He did something unexpected. He gave them His own prayer. How does this prayer begin? Here in Luke it says: "Father!" In Matthew it says: "Our Father!"

Think about this, – who is the true Son of God the Father? Of course, it is the Second Person of the Trinity, the Eternal Son, who was born as one of us, as Jesus from Nazareth. He is the true Son of His Heavenly Father.

He is the One who can properly address God as Father. But... the wonderful grace of God! Through Jesus Christ God the Father not only saves humanity from sin and death, through Jesus He also makes us members of His family.

When we are united with Jesus, when we have received the Holy Spirit in our Baptism, or by hearing the Gospel, and in the Sacrament, we are included and kept into God's own family. We become adopted children of God.

Now, dwell on this image for a while... God is your Father. As Luther puts it in the Small Catechism, He is our true and dear Father. When we think about our fathers, we may or may not get the most encouraging or comforting images.

Earthy fathers always fall short. I do. But our God is the perfect Father. Loving, kind, gentle, patient, He delights conversing with you, He longs to hear our prayers. There is nothing that we could ask wrong, there is nothing too great or too small for Him.

He looks at you as His beloved child, He wants to be trusted, He wants to be the one to whom we run with all our cares and with all our joys. He runs first to embrace you. This is the God that we are privileged to pray for. Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and Your loving and faithful Father in heaven. Dwell on this image...

How do we pray? How are Christian prayers different? When people pray, they usually do it so that someone more powerful than they (a god) would help them to change the reality the way they want it to be.

When Christians pray, we pray in the name of Jesus. What does this mean? It means that we pray united with Jesus, that we pray together with Jesus, and we let Jesus, the Word of God shape and mould our prayers.

Or we could put it this way. When Christians pray, we don't try to make the Supreme Being to change the world according to our desires. When Christians pray, we pray that our Lord Jesus would strengthen our trust in our Father and change our desires to be in harmony with God's will.

So that what we pray would be in full harmony with what Jesus Himself would pray. And do you know what Jesus does to help us? Remember, He has given us His own prayer. He has made you members of His family, so that we can participate in His family prayers.

But now, let's take a look at what He actually prays in this prayer. Two wonderful things happen. The first three petitions in the Lord's prayer, or two as Luke has recorded it, are to do with the Father. The focus is on God the Father and His mission.

"Hallowed be Your Name, Your Kingdom come, Your will be done." Or as Luther summarized it: "That the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as the children of God also lead holy lives in accordance with it.

[That] our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead a godly life. [That] God breaks ... every evil counsel ... which would not let us hallow the name of God nor let His kingdom come ... but strengthens and keeps us steadfast in His Word and in faith unto our end."

As Jesus gives us this prayer, He identifies us with Himself. He brings us into His family business. He invites us to pray for the same things that He is praying for. But then comes the surprising turn.

Jesus identifies with us. He comes to us and prays for all our daily needs. "Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation. [But deliver us from evil.]"

Jesus Himself as the Son of God wouldn't need any of this, but now He identifies Himself with us, with you. The way He is united with us and the way He is with us is so close and intimate that Jesus Himself prays for all our needs.

The will of the Father and the will of Jesus become our will, and our needs and concerns become Jesus' needs and concerns. God and His chosen people are united in Jesus and when we pray, we pray so that this unity would grow deeper and deeper.

Finally, why do we pray? We will highlight two things. Privilege and receiving. First about the privilege. Do we realize how privileged we are? No... we don't. The Triune God is the Creator and the Ruler of the Universe. Everything is in His hands.

And now He has invited you to bring your concerns and advises before Him. You have got the Father's ear for you. And there are so many things to pray for... Our sister who has inoperable tumour, our brother who suffers from pain, our child or spouse who has wandered away from faith, or who maybe never had known Jesus, and whom we desperately want to be saved.

We can't help them. We can't change their situation. We can't change their hearts. But we can bring their needs to our Father. We can entrust Him all the people and situations where we are helpless, for He has all the power. And if what we pray is in harmony with His good will and His gracious plans, He will help.

This is why Jesus told that strange story about the friend, who wouldn't give the bread when asked. That situation is unimaginable in the context of Middle Eastern hospitality. The point that Jesus is making is this.

If even such unimaginably rude friend would finally give you what you ask for, then ... how much more, how much more certainly our Father who is in heaven will give you what you need. You can be assured that your prayers will be heard.

The second reason why we need to pray is receiving. That's right, our prayers are so much more about us receiving than they are about our doing. Ask in the name of Jesus, pray so that your will is in full harmony with the will of Jesus and the will of the Father, and you will be surprised how much you receive.

There is something surprising in the very last verse that we read. Something we need to remember when we think about prayer. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you... 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!"

Ask, seek, knock and ... it will be given to you. But what will be given to you? Did you notice the wonderful surprise? The Holy Spirit will be given to you! What is that about? Remember who we pray, – our loving and gracious Father.

When you need something, and when you go to your parents' house, and knock, what happens? The doors are open and you are invited in. Come in, my dear child! The same thing happens when we turn with our prayers to our Father in Heaven.

We knock, and He opens... and He invites us in. Where does He invite us? Sure, He has invited us in the communion of His saints, in the Church. He invites us in His Kingdom, where He reigns and which will be fully manifested in the New Heavens and the New Earth. But there is even more.

Your Father invites you to be with Him, in the Divine Fellowship with Himself and His Son Jesus. As John the apostle wrote it: "Indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." It is the Holy Spirit who brings us in this fellowship.

That's why we pray. For the Father has promised to bless us abundantly with His Spirit, to dwell with us now, and to have us with Him in the age to come. And if we who are evil give good things to our children, then how much more our Father who is in heaven will give us His Spirit!

Prayer... there is so much more than we can reflect in one sermon. I just pray that what was said would help you to rejoice in this great privilege, to have access to the Father's ear, to our loving Father in heaven, so that we can bring our needs and the needs of our loved ones to Him, and that you all would greatly enjoy the fellowship with the Father and with Jesus our Lord through the Holy Spirit.

Amen.