

“Theo-anthropology”  
Based on Luke 11: 1-13  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
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*“hush little baby don’t say a word, Papa’s gonna buy you a mockingbird.  
If that mockingbird don’t sing, Papa’s gonna buy you a diamond ring...”*

A lot of people think of God as the ultimate “Papa.” Like the “Papa” in the lullaby, they think that God’s gonna provide whatever they want. If they only pray hard enough or long enough or if they’re faithful enough, God’s gonna get them that diamond ring. And today’s scripture passage can certainly be misunderstood to support that belief. While prayer is so important in the Christian faith, it is also frequently misunderstood. So called “unanswered” prayers, or more precisely, prayers that don’t get the answers we seek, can lead to frustration, pain, or even crises in faith. The problem of the “unanswered” prayer leads us to believe that there’s something wrong with our equation—there must be something wrong with either God or me if God isn’t providing what I so dearly want, or even need. Those of us of faith are more likely to be uncomfortable with the idea that there’s something wrong with God, which brings it back on us with thoughts like, “I must not be praying enough, or faithfully enough, or perhaps there’s some deep flaw in me that is causing God to ignore my prayers.” Some may think, maybe I just don’t know how to pray right. So we seek advice, “teach me how to pray.”

“I just don’t know how to pray.” While I now know that this is a very common confession for ministers to hear, when I was in high school, I thought it was a unique problem I had. And when I told my pastor that I didn’t know how to pray, he shared with me that he prays the Lord’s Prayer first thing in the morning, several times over, until he feels ready to move on into the rest of his prayer. Makes sense. But I don’t remember if I tried it or not; if I did, it didn’t stick. Several years later, I told another pastor of my dilemma. I think he said something about how it doesn’t matter what you say in prayer, it’s the act of praying that’s most important, not the wording of the prayer. Again, a valid answer. But when I didn’t seem satisfied, he mentioned a book title to me, a book I admit I never sought out.

Last night financial guru Suze Orman started her show with the question, “Have you ever wondered to yourself, are there some words, any words, out there that you can say, that you can repeat, that would really be the key to your success; that could turn everything around if things weren’t going right for you?” Ooh—this is going to be good—Suze’s going to give us the magic words that will turn everything around and make us a success! “The Six Greatest Words” as she called them. Sounds kinda hokey, right? Certain words to throw out to the universe to turn our lives around... But I don’t think that idea is too far off what the disciples are asking of Jesus in today’s scripture, or what I was asking of my pastors. We want the words to pray, we want to know some kind of formula for prayer that will make God answer our prayers. We want the prayer equivalent of winning lottery numbers.

Prayer, and specifically the importance of prayer in Jesus’ life, is a major theme throughout Luke’s gospel. All through Luke, big things happen when Jesus is praying—the Holy Spirit arrives after his baptism when he is praying, the Transfiguration occurs while he is

praying. Jesus even prays from the cross. So finally, here in chapter eleven, after seeing Jesus withdraw for prayer time and time again, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. Apparently John had taught his followers how to pray and they want special instructions, too. Like Greg Mortensen in *Three Cups of Tea* being tutored in Muslim prayer in Afghanistan, they wanted specific directions on how best to pray and what to say, what to do. While Jesus is obliging and does teach them a prayer, he goes beyond simply telling the disciples how to pray as they requested. It's not just about the words you say and posture to take. Jesus goes further to tell them, and us, about our relationship with God and prayer. He teaches us that prayer is a conversation with God, but not only does Jesus teach about prayer in these passages but about God, and not only about God, but more precisely, about God-in-relationship-with-us, or as theologian Karl Barth termed it, "theo-anthropology."

Jesus starts with the Lucan version of the Lord's Prayer which, it has been suggested, given the intended audience and use might be better named the Disciples' Prayer.<sup>1</sup> This version of the Lord's Prayer is shorter than the Matthean version on which the prayer we use is based. Beginning by addressing God as "Father," suggests a closeness and familiarity with God that while we all know is appropriate for Jesus, is also passed on to us. The notion of God as Father also fits in with where Jesus is going later on in today's passage when he likens God's relationship with us to that of a parent and child. "Father, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come." Jesus continues with a typically Jewish doxology, attributing praise to God whose very name is holy and confession that God's reign has drawn near (in the coming of Jesus) and through our prayer we participate with God and Jesus in bringing God's reign to fruition here on earth.

The next section of the prayer is that of the petitions. The first petition, "Give us each day our daily bread," is in the middle of the prayer, and serves as a reminder that however much we might think we provide for ourselves, in fact, it is God who provides and we should always be grateful for the good with which we are blessed. "Give us our daily bread" is much more poetic than "give us our daily food" or "don't let us starve" but that's what it's getting at. Bread was such a staple in ancient times—synonymous with food, sustenance and life itself. But bread also has such a warm, hearty connotation, for me at least. It is so basic and yet also so good.

The next petition is for forgiveness. "And forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." The petition is not only for God's forgiveness of us and but also acknowledgement that God's forgiveness of us requires our forgiveness of others which is prompted by God's forgiveness of us. (Coincidentally, for those of you who were wondering, Suze Orman's "Six Greatest Words" were: "I admit that I was wrong." The idea being that once you admit your financial, or any other mistakes, you can begin rectifying them and move on.) And the Greek verbs Jesus uses here: a present-tense verb for forgiving others which indicates that our forgiveness of others is an ongoing process; but the verb for God's forgiveness of us anticipates a once and for all forgiveness from God.

The prayer concludes, "And do not bring us to the time of trial." This final petition addresses preservation, not from temptation from sin, but from those things that test and threaten

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose "Commentary on the Gospel: Luke 11: 1-13" <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4>

our faith<sup>2</sup>, a petition that would have been particularly meaningful to the early Christians as they faced persecution for their faith.

Without all the flowery language that might have been common in the prayers of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time, this prayer gets right to the point: give us...forgive us... lead us...the end. It's direct to the point of being almost rude. Shameless even. And to illustrate this shamelessness, Jesus tells the parable of the friend at midnight. Jesus says, "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."

The situation Jesus sets up here may sound outrageous to our modern American sensibilities. We might think, "how rude to bother your neighbor for food in the middle of the night!" Not to mention, it seems a little much to ask for three loaves of bread. Why does he need so many? He says just one friend arrived... Would that leave this other friend with any bread for himself? But Jesus sets this up under the exact opposite assumption. For Jesus' audience, the idea of a friend refusing to answer the door and help with food to enable a friend to provide hospitality is just as preposterous as the idea of a parent handing a snake to a hungry child later in the text.

But does this mean that God only answers prayers because we pester God? Because we are persistent, as the text seems to indicate? No. The word translated here as "persistence," but many scholars suggest a more precise translation than "persistence" would be "shamelessness"<sup>3</sup>. The friend requesting bread displays a shamelessness marked by familiarity that one might have with a close friend or family member. Indeed, Jesus only indicates that the friend knocks once, not repeatedly and persistently. But while the terribly rude friend would eventually give in to the demands of friendship and hospitality, God willingly and happily provides our needs for us.

In the last section of today's lesson, Jesus says, "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!" This scripture is often used to point to asking God for anything, if done with persistence, means God will give us anything. A house, a job, a parking space, or in Janis Joplin's case, a Mercedes-Benz... But the last line specifically references the Holy Spirit. God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Not a winning lottery ticket.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew L. Skinner, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 289.

<sup>3</sup> John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1977), 116-17.

We are called to ask, search and knock, confident that the One to whom we pray is the One who cares for us most. To illustrate this point Jesus employs the “how much more” rhetoric from Jewish tradition. “How much more” is used to convey that what is true in a minor example—in this case a human parent and child—will most certainly be true in a grander example—in this case our Divine Parent, who will provide, not necessarily everything we ask for or what we most want, but what is most beneficial for us, even when it doesn’t seem that way, even when it seems God is handing us the scorpion and the snake.

In a book on prayer from 1942, George Buttrick, one of the great preachers of the Twentieth Century, wrote, “If God is not, and the life of man poor, solitary, nasty, brutish and short, prayer is the veriest self-deceit. If God is, yet is known only as vague rumor and dark coercion, prayer is whimpering folly: it were nobler to die. But if God is in some deep and eternal sense like Jesus, friendship with Him is our first concern, worthiest art, best resource, and sublimest joy.”<sup>4</sup> Translation: if there is no God, and our lives are simply poor, solitary, nasty and short, then prayer is self-deceit. If God exists but is impersonal, unloving and uncaring, then prayer is a whimpering folly and we’d be better off dead. But if God does exist and is like Jesus, then our chief concern and greatest joy in life should be friendship with God.

And that is what prayer is. Prayer is about our relationship with God. In this prayer Jesus teaches us a prayer which can be used either verbatim or as an outline for prayer: name God, praise God, petition for material needs, petition for forgiveness and petition for faith. But more importantly, Jesus teaches us that prayer isn’t about getting what we ask for. It’s not a payment for service arrangement in which if we compensate God with enough prayers God will satisfy our every request from mockingbird to diamond ring to Mercedes-Benz. Rather, prayer is our conversation with God, a mark of the relationship and a continuation of the relationship.

And in that relationship we are called to be shameless in our prayer, confident of the One to whom we pray. There’s nothing wrong with asking God for anything and everything you desire, but just remember that “askin’ ain’t gettin’.”<sup>5</sup> Remember the One who is the Originator of all our blessings: food and water, breath and life itself. Remember that our material needs are few but our spiritual needs are great. Our spiritual needs will be met if we knock, search, ask; the good gifts of the Holy Spirit will be given.

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<sup>4</sup> George Buttrick, *Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1942), 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Gone with the Wind*