

“Don’t Lose Heart”

A good portion of life centers on a three-letter word: a-s-k ... “ask.” The infant asks for food, the child asks “why”, the adolescent asks for “the car,” the suitor asks for a date, the unemployed asks for a job, the politician asks for votes, the telemarketer asks for a minute of your time, the ball-player asks for a time-out, charities asks for your money, the sick ask for a cure, the suffering ask for relief, the wronged ask for justice, the penitent asks for mercy, the accused asks for clemency, the victim asks for restitution, the church asks for your support, and the nation asks what you can do for it, not what it can do for you.

Today’s gospel lesson begins with a disciple asking Jesus how to pray. It was a normal custom for a Rabbi to teach his disciples a simple prayer which they could habitually use. John the Baptist had done that for his disciples. Now Jesus’ disciples came asking him to do the same for them. This is Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, which Presbyterians use saying “debts and debtors.” It is shorter than Matthew’s version, which other denominations use saying “trespasses.” The early church father, Tertullian, calls the Lord’s Prayer “an epitome of the whole gospel!”

The Lord’s Prayer is a series of askings: give us our daily bread ... forgive us ... lead us not into temptation ... deliver us from evil. Jesus follows up his prayer with his immortal words about asking ... the need to ask and the need to keep on asking. Jesus illustrates *persistence* in asking with a humorous parable about some inconsiderate person who pounds on his neighbor’s door at midnight asking for three loaves of bread to feed his guest, who has arrived late. The point of Jesus’ parable is not the outrageous request, but the imperative to ask and ask and ask ... regardless of when, why or where. Then Jesus makes a larger point ... asking for the God’s Holy Spirit ... life’s ultimate gift; for God’s Spirit is the basic gift to ask for ... and the Spirit is available for the asking.

We, like those disciples before us, ask Jesus to teach us to pray. In fact, when you stop and think about it, the whole focus of our worship lays heavy emphasis on prayer. During the opening music, the Prelude, I call your attention to why we are here, and ask you to prepare in prayer to worship God; then we have the Prayer of Confession, both spoken and in silence, to further prepare us to come before God. We have the Prayer of Illumination, preparing our ears and mind to hear God’s Word; the message is given, and there is prayer following, sometimes a silent reflection, sometimes spoken.

The fact is prayer does not come naturally. We must be taught and disciplined to pray, thus the various types and kinds of prayers both written and spontaneously given. And take note that “The People Praying,” our prayer for others, comes before the Offering because this is our time to offer ourselves to God in prayer ... a God who has offered Himself to us.

When we pray, we are not simply telling God what we want. Rather, we are placing our wants within the context of God’s will for the world. Recall Paul’s word: *We do not know how to pray as we ought* (Romans 8:26). Presumably prayer ... true Christian prayer ... takes time, effort, and practice. Knowing that God’s will may differ from our own, the last prayer in the worship service before we go out to minister is the Prayer of Thanksgiving followed by the Lord’s Prayer. John Wesley reminds us: *The end of your praying is not to inform God, as though God knew not your wants already, but rather to inform yourselves.* In prayer, we ask for what God can and will do, and we leave this sanctuary hoping to serve God ... faithfully discharging our duties as disciples.

But we also in prayer acknowledge the things God does not do. There are many things we ask God to do ... heal the sick, feed the hungry, make peace ... things that we are unwilling to do ourselves because of the sacrifice and suffering it might cause us. Yet, there are things that God, for some reason, cannot or will not do. Why? I must confess that I am unable to understand my *why* questions ... why I pray for a deadly disease to be healed and it becomes worse. At this point in my life, I’ve learned that prayer does not usually answer my *why* questions, but my prayers do give me the faith and the hope to live each day in spite of the lack of answers. And, in the long run, I find that faith is often more valuable than answers; that I should not lose heart because my *whys* go unanswered.

God commands us to do great things in God’s name. Where great things are commanded of us, there is great opportunity for disappointment and failure. Yet God also gives us what we need for the task and we are to be persistent in our determination to be faithful to what is expected of us.

Loren Easley is a distinguished anthropologist and fine writer. He tells a story in his book, The Unexpected Universe, in which he writes of an encounter with a Star Thrower on the beach. After a storm, Easley saw the professional shell collectors gather up shells in great baskets from the beach, piling them up, preparing to cook their living contents for future sale. But then he noticed another figure, not gathering up shells, but tossing something into the sea. He came closer to see what on earth the man was doing.

The figure stood on the beach, arched in a rainbow after the storm, though seemingly unaware of the rainbow that framed him. He would stoop, pick up an object, and toss it into the surf. As Eislely came closer he realized that the man was throwing beached starfish into the surf. Whereas the others were collecting the starfish for sale, he was saving the starfish by throwing them back into the surf, one-by-one.

Eislely stood next to him as he stood over a starfish. "It's alive," I said. "Yes," said the Star Thrower as he stooped down, picked it up, and with a smooth motion, threw the starfish back into the surf. "If the current picks it up, it will live." "Do you collect?" I asked him. "No. I only collect the living and send them back to the sea," said the Star Thrower. "Eislely told the man that he no longer collected either the living or the dead. "Death is the only true collector," Eislely said to the man, somberly. Before leaving, Eislely took one last look at the Star Thrower, etched again the rising sun. The Star Thrower was no match for the sea. "Death is out running the Star Thrower on every beach in the world," thought Eislely to himself. Eislely said that he was a scientist, objectively describing what he saw. "Nevertheless," he said, "I had seen that rainbow, attempting to attach itself to the earth."

He ran into the Star Thrower again, later in the day, just up the beach. Eislely joined the Star Thrower in his work. There were two of them now. They were all part of that "projection into the natural." Eislely said that throwing starfish into the surf made him feel like he was "sowing life" into the great sea. Though the task that they assumed "was immense," Eislely "flung, and flung, and flung again." Eislely said that he realized that it was humanity as well as starfish that they were saving. Passion had been rediscovered ... life had been brought from death ... life had been sowed amid the destruction. Perhaps the Star Thrower was lonely. The purpose of the task in which they were engaged was larger than they could see. In flinging the starfish back to the sea, they were flinging themselves. This is what Eiseley said he learned from the Star Thrower.

Persistence! For example, when we pray for healing, we also must be the ones willing to change the bandages, empty the bed-pans, and keep the night vigils. Our work is an extension of our prayer, not a substitute for it. To pray "in Jesus' name" means to position ourselves to look at life as Jesus did ... to stand not above the poor, the sick, the oppressed, and the lonely, but to stand beside them. Gradually, if we do not lose heart, and heed the urging of Scripture to be persistent in prayer, we will find that the desires we want to lift up to God will be converted. The "give me, give me, give me" becomes "make me, make me, make me."

Prayer changes things ... even us! We are not praying to just any god. We bow before the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God to whom Mary said, "I am the handmaid of the Lord," and to whom Jesus on the cross said, "Thy will be done." Never forget that our prayers are possible only as they relate to the desires of this God whom we worship. The true test is not whether you or I get what we ask for, but rather the effect that prayer has on our life. By this I do not imply that any serious prayer has ever been unheard or ignored. As parents, when our children ask us for something, we have to discern whether or not it is wise for them or for us to honor their request. So with God ... who discerns for us what we actually need ... which may run counter to our request.

Mahatma Gandhi, who claimed that he never made a minor decision without prayer, also said that he made sure to ask for the right thing. To illustrate, he once wrote: *There was a law directed expressly against Indians in South Africa, and I had come there to oppose it. My ship was met by a hostile mob and I was advised to stay on board for the sake of my physical safety, for the crowd had come with the announced intention of lynching me. I went ashore nevertheless. I was stoned and kicked and beaten a good deal; but I had not prayed for safety, but for the courage to face the mob, and that courage came and did not fail me.*

The courage was of God's Spirit ... the Spirit that comes through prayer. There is an old saying, "No good prayer ever comes weeping home." For either God changes the circumstance or supplies sufficient power to overcome the circumstance. God answers our prayers by providing us with the power of the Holy Spirit to endure and surmount any circumstance. Remember, the biblical injunction to ask is not completed by "It will be answered," but rather ... "It will be given to you."

What is given to you is the Holy Spirit ... the same Spirit that led and empowered Jesus ... the same Spirit that came to Jesus' followers at Pentecost and empowered the apostles to continue Jesus' ministry ... the same Spirit given to us when we are persistent in our faith. The first Apostles did not give up the gospel though they suffered greatly for what they believe. Don't you lose heart ... don't lose faith though your life circumstance may be full of unanswered questions. Ask! Seek! Knock ... Knock ... Knock ... and knock some more!! Amen!