

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (c)
Genesis 18:20-32 Colossians 2:6-19 Luke 11:1-13
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
July 24, 2022 [Traditional]

In one of my former congregations, there was a man who battled leukemia for years. Sadly, it took his life at the young age of 29. He was a bachelor, a very quiet, soft-spoken guy. An insurance agent. After he died, his mom and dad gave me his private journals—about ten books, completely filled with his tiny handwriting. If you typed them all out it would be thousands of pages. His parents gave me permission to read from the journals as much I could before the funeral; in fact they wanted me to read them before they looked at them.

So I opened them up and found out that this guy had been creating journal entries practically every day of his life since early high school. And it was amazing. Beautiful. Passionate. I'd say publish-able. You'd never think this quiet, soft-spoken man would have such an active...even turbulent...inner life. It wasn't about what he bought at the grocery store on July 3rd. No, there was poetry, there was philosophical and theological reflection on practically all aspects of life.

And he was a passionate believer. This man brought everything to God. His worries and fears, his joys and failures and successes. Those journals were one big beautiful act of prayer. Sometimes he was lost in the dark—like God was far away—and he screamed at God: “where are you? Why don't you listen to me!” Other times he felt like God was on his back, hounding him, way too close. And then there were passages of pure peace and beauty, where God was all in all, where he felt life was perfect. On top of the world; the creature and his Creator in perfect harmony. It reminded me a lot of the book of Psalms.

So here's a person who persistently banged on God's door...like Jesus tells us to do in the Gospel lesson. He saw his whole life and the world in the light of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He wrestled with God, he rejoiced, he yelled, he begged for forgiveness, he worshiped. And in the end, when he knew he was going to die, he constantly asked God to empty him out, so that he could be a vessel filled with God's light. And what a victory we know he had in the end. But through all the ups and downs of his life, this man was having a lively, honest, no-holds-barred conversation with God. It was beautiful, inspiring and awesome.

Prayer does involve asking God for things. But it's a lot better, and a lot more simple than that: it's a conversation with God, like my parishioner had every day. God gives us his word; we respond to him consciously, we call him by his name, we acknowledge his power in our daily lives. We take him at his word, that he is close at hand, listening to our every word. So we give him our attention, we give him our words, our daily thoughts, our dreams and daily frustrations. That's what a living relationship with God looks like. God wants to have that back-and-forth with us. It's like a good marriage; we

can never fix all our problems as husbands and wives. That's not really what it's about. It's about going through every part of the big painful and joyful mess with your love.

Obviously our relationship with God is different than our relationships with each other, because we know we cannot give God anything he needs. He gives us everything. God just loves to hear us ask him for everything. It's not that he's petty—like “you need to ask for it first.” Not at all. It's really that he loves the sound of your voice. It's like, in Jesus, he's always got his true face turned to us. In Jesus, he's baring his heart completely to us. And he just loves it when we forgiven sinners turn and look him in the eyes. That's a good picture of prayer. It's that personal sharing. That love relationship.

It's easy to forget how radical prayer is. Prayer is the embodiment of one of our foundational beliefs about God: *He listens*. He cares about each and every life. The creator of all the galaxies counts every little sparrow that falls to the earth. He's 100% involved in every blade of grass that ever lived. Every dodo bird that went extinct, every amoeba that ever lived, is infinitely precious to him. If we think that's silly, that's just our limitations speaking, not God's. And you and I are more than amoebas. The King of the universe created us in his image. He listens to you when you speak to him. To YOU. He responds to YOU, individually. He wants you to share your life with him, and he wants to give the fullness of his life, 100%, to you.

One thing I've learned is that prayer begins as a discipline. I've had to start over with it many times in my life. Left to ourselves, we will not pray as we should. Just as Jesus knows he needs to teach us how to pray in the gospel, parents have to teach their children to pray, to make it a habit. Don't fall into that super-Christian trap of thinking prayer always has to be a spontaneous outpouring...like it's only something we should do when we feel like it. A person who prays only when they feel like it is probably going to stop praying after a while. No. As with any tool in the shed—prayer begins as something you learn, and as you continue using the tool, it becomes part of your nature. God puts this tool in *our* hands. Prayer is something we do of our free will. That's the beauty of it, but it's also why we end up neglecting it; it's why the devil wants us to do it only when we feel like it. How do you fight the devil? Make prayer a habit—a routine. I've found that making prayer part of my morning routine—specifically my morning shower—that's what anchors it in my calendar. Spontaneity will come later—don't worry about spontaneity. It's funny how Christians get caught up in the shackles of thinking they have to be spontaneous all the time with worship.

In a marriage, if you're not talking to your spouse, listening to your spouse, thinking about your spouse's needs, then you're probably drifting apart on the everyday level of simple sharing. Of course you're still completely married, but it's just a fact that the relationship will lose its life, its spontaneity, its energy and dynamism if you don't give it conscious attention. It's the same in our relationship with God. Yes, he's completely married himself to us in Christ. That commitment on his side is not going to change. He's going to give us what we need. But the Holy Spirit is the life of the marriage, and prayer is the first manifestation of that life.

I love how Jesus says be persistent with God. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you...God will answer your daily prayers in the way they need to be answered. It's not meant to be an obligation. It's an amazing privilege to be able to bring your deepest desires directly to the Almighty. Whatever you and I are doing today, whether we're living or dying, is going to end in him. And in Christ, we can bring it all to him—including all the ugly stuff—and lay it at his feet today.

God is so persistent with us. We can be sure that a Lord who dies for us and is buried in a grave for us is certainly going to get himself involved in our work, in our marriage, in our family life. Just like he opened the grave for us, he's always opening doors for us in the middle of our lives. Giving us new opportunities to step out of the prison of our personal worlds, to serve him, follow him, and praise him, and shine his light. Prayer opens our eyes, so that we can see those doors swinging open! He wants to help us in our suffering, help us with our problems, and show us the right way to live, the right choices to make. Nothing makes that more clear than the Son coming into our lives. Instead of waiting for us to knock on his door, God has come through the door. He comes into our lives, to take up his throne of kingship here in our lives—on the cross.

Our Father knows what we need, and he gives us what we need. He meets us in the ugliest, most lonely, most painful of all places. And he's willing to give everything he has to us there. He's done it for us, on the cross. And now, prayer is where we start purposely, consciously giving it all over to him. Trade it all in—your sins, your sorrows, your sicknesses. Watch him turn it all into a resurrection.