



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
28 July 2019
Sermon: Knockin' on Heaven's Door
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Genesis 28:20-32
Luke 11:1-13

It was Wednesday when the irony hit me the hardest. I was in a rush to get to the church because I was behind on my preparations for this sermon about prayer, and I was annoyed, and I was feeling frustrated. Duke, our 13-year-old Labrador has an incontinence problem that was especially bad on Wednesday morning, so with my bare feet I kept stepping in these invisible puddles he was leaving all along our dark laminate floor. At his age, he still has the high spirits of a Lab, but he can't see or hear very well, so while I'm avoiding or trying to track down his puddles, he's also constantly tripping me up, or just standing right where I need to go, wagging his tail, dribbling on the floor. Our 3-year-old son Joseph, is, let's say, still developing his understanding and empathy for Duke's limitations, so at the same time, he's also trying to chase Duke down or pet or clothe the dog in some way. It seems the more we tell him not to, the more Joseph does it, in true 3-year-old fashion.

After some time of dealing with this dynamic while trying to get ready myself, I've had it. I speak to Joseph sharply, not demonstrating the patience and understanding I would like to model, "Go, brush your teeth!" Joseph then reacts to my sternness with giggles. He's going to be quite the anti-authoritarian when he grows up. The toothbrush eventually gets to his mouth, but you wouldn't call what he does brushing. It's more of an

exfoliating performance around the edges of his lips. So I then grab the toothbrush. I shout, "Open!" and I brush his teeth, perhaps too vigorously, taking my frustration out on his plaque and baby-tooth enamel.

In the middle of this brushing, while I am holding my son's head in my hands and trying to be thorough, I realize the irony of the situation: here I am, feeling rushed and frustrated, and also, to be honest, a bit ashamed with myself – I mean, why can't I just have a bit more patience? But I'm pushing ahead, with gritted teeth myself - "Would you just sit still and let me brush your teeth – Open your mouth!" - so that I can get to the church to write a sermon about prayer and contemplation. It's funny in retrospect because it's so ridiculous, but in the moment, it was just strain and rush and hurry.

In such moments, I wonder, do you think about prayer? When you're frustrated? When you're rushing? Do you pray when you feel at a distance from God's peace and rest and abundance?

Not me, not at that moment. "Lord, teach us to pray" said the disciples, but it wasn't until the ride to church when I actually thought to pray, and then, I probably wouldn't have done it, to be honest, if it wasn't for this looming sermon on prayer. But in the car, I said those words we all know so well by heart. **Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever.** And, in that moment, in the stillness of prayer, I caught a glimpse of who I am. Not this rushed ball of frustration, needing to tick off accomplishments for the work day, but a child of God, asking for peace.

I want to do a thought experiment with you all this morning. It's going to take a bit of math in your head, so bear with me.

- Everyone think of a number between 1 and 10.
- Now Multiply that number by 9.
- Now if you have a 2 digit number, add those 2 digits together. For example, if you have 35, add 3+5 and you'll get 8.
- Ok, now subtract 5.
- You should have a single digit in your mind now. Find the corresponding letter of the alphabet to that number: for example, 1 is A; 2 is B; 3 is C and so on. Do you have a letter?
- Think of a country that begins with that letter.
- Now think of an animal that begins with the last letter of that country.
- Now think of a fruit that begins with the last letter of that animal.

By a raise of hands, how many people are in Denmark, with a kangaroo, eating an orange? I learned this exercise last weekend at a 2-day training with the Racial Equity Institute, REI.¹ It was one of the first exercises we did, and well over 50% of the room, in a group of 47 participants, myself included, were thinking Denmark, kangaroo, orange. If you did the math correctly, you should have landed on the number 4, which corresponds with the letter D. The point of the exercise, though, is to ask participants why, when there's 6 countries in the world that begin with that letter, the vast majority of us think Denmark and not, for example, the Dominican Republic, which is about 4x closer to us. The reason is

¹ The Racial Equity Institute, <https://www.racialequityinstitute.com>, accessed July 26, 2019.

that we all automatically work out of a certain framework that has been given to us. For example, finish the sentence: something common is “A Dime a...[dozen]”; when you are in a bad situation you are “Between a rock and...[a hard place]”; having to start over is going “Back to...[square one].” These narratives come automatically to us. They are part of our wiring. We don’t have to think about it consciously. Why do so many of us think Denmark when we are asked to name a country that begins with D? It’s because Denmark is in Europe. And we have been given a Western bias, a bias toward countries that are primarily white. The same thing happened at the Racial Justice Institute, in a racially diverse group, where we were all ready to talk about racial equity. The majority of us said Denmark.

For much of the next two days, our Racial Equity educators went through the history of the last 400 years, of the systemic ways our country has, at every turn, aligned whites together by privileging us over people of color. To name just a few examples from the last century, they covered how Social Security was designed to exclude jobs held primarily by people of color; redlining meant that only white neighborhoods were given federally backed loans; segregation and exclusion ensured that the GI Bill would fund only white students’ education; medical standardization in the early 20th century closed 5 out of the 7 black medical schools in the country, a profound factor in the racial health disparities of today. And on and on and on it just kept coming. There was so much, they didn’t even have to go into the immigration detention centers of today; family separation and ICE raids; the “Go back to your country” rhetoric that has targeted and terrorized communities of color these last few weeks, dividing our country and privileging whites with surgical precision. I deeply recommend the Racial Equity Institute. It was, quite helpfully, a disorienting experience.

“Lord, teach us to pray” asked the disciples, and I empathize with that request. Because the more we go into the racial justice and equity work that we have started here at Grace Covenant, the more I realize I am at odds with myself. “Ask,” says Jesus, “and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” But what is it that I should ask? At what door do I knock? The deeper we go, the more I find myself turned around again, as we see further the enormity of this wound, this fissure, at the center of our country, at the center of our church, in the center of ourselves. I find myself at an impasse, with more questions than answers. In what ways have our hopes, our dreams, our ideas of what success looks like, of what peace and prosperity look like, of what right and wrong look like – in short, in what ways have our very prayers been shaped by a culture that, at every turn, has said that white is right, white is good and normal and moral and just, white must be privileged because white is superior? In this culture, white people like myself cannot help but be shaped in such ways. When we get just a glimpse of the water we are swimming in, we get, quite rightfully, disoriented.

I wonder where you feel at an impasse today? Do you pray when you feel that disorientation? That feeling of being lost? “Lord, teach us to pray” said the disciples. And Jesus responds with the words we know so well by heart: **Our mother, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever.**

What does it mean to pray this prayer today? Let us look, for a moment, at the words of Luke, who gives us just an abbreviated form of the Lord's Prayer²:

- It begins simply, "Father" or we could say "Mother": In other words, the God we pray to is not a tyrant from above, nor an impassionate judge of your soul, but rather chooses to be known in God's relationship to us and with us. God is the God who is close. For some the metaphor of parent is appropriate, for others different words ring true: "Love"; "Righteousness"; "Savior." The address is meant to be close and Holy to us; it brings us to reverence; it brings us back to the source of life and goodness.
- "Your kingdom come": Is a plea to see God in this world. May we see a reflection of God, of love, of mercy, right here, and in lonely places, in oppressive places, and even in the very places inside us that feel tight, or frustrated, the parts of us that are just barely holding on, the places that feel so devoid of love right now. Notice it doesn't ask us to name what we think God's kingdom is. It doesn't require our expectations or plans. We simply ask for God to come to us.
- "Give us each day our daily bread." Some commentators translate this "Our necessary bread" or "The bread we need." Give us what we need. Sometimes we don't know what we need but we know the feeling of want, of emptiness. So we pray this prayer, in trust that God knows exactly what we need.
- "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Because grace and forgiveness go hand in hand. Because God calls us in as we call out. God

² For the following section, I'm indebted to Luke Timothy Johnson's exegesis of this passage, *The Gospel of Luke*. Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 176-179.

call us in to action, to love, to justice, to freedom, through the very act of grace. In other words, this prayer is not passive. It is a prayer asking for direction, for reorientation, for action, even when we feel lost.

- “And do not bring us to the time of trial”: Because life is precious. And we depend on God, the source of life, in every breath we take.

Looking closely at this prayer, we find it does not necessitate stillness or deep contemplation. It can be said through gritted teeth, on busy mornings, in frustration surrounded by screaming kids or it can be said in the depths of sorrow, in a house or office that feels lonely and quiet and far too empty. This prayer doesn't even require a book study, a deep and informed theological and sociological and woke vision of God's kingdom and your daily bread. In short, prayer does not have to come from a place of self-assurance, complete clarity. It can come from places of brokenness, of disorientation.

The disciples ask Jesus how to pray and what he gives them is a prayer that is about reaching out to God in our time of need. This prayer gives us a way to voice our desire to see God, to see love and justice and healing in our life and in our world. These days, I feel that desire, deeply within. I see that desire in this church, in our lives. We see it even and especially in this hurting and unjust and often cruel world.

And through prayer, as we reach out to God; God reaches back to us; God nourishes us; God directs and enlightens and challenges us, because prayer is a way to grow closer to God. We pause and we reach out and connect to that source of love and abundance from which we come. Prayer is not passive or escapist, a fantasy or a wish-list. Rather, it is what fuels us to work in the name of love and justice another day. So let us continue to pray together, **Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come, thy**

will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen.