

Sweet Hour of Prayer Luke 11:1-13

The Most Beautiful Altar

Good morning church! I am glad to be back home after a long trip. My family has made many good memories on this trip. I taught you how to say “United States” in Korean last year. Do you remember it? If you don’t, that’s o.k. I will teach you one more time. It’s “미궤(mi-guk).” Say “미궤” 미(mi) which means ‘beautiful’ and 궤(guk) which means ‘a country’ so a literal translation of 미궤 is ‘a beautiful country.’ During this trip, I could feel why the United States can be called ‘a beautiful country.’ [ppt] We saw Bison, elk, and bears, geysers, arches, and many beautiful mountains and deserts. It was beautiful. We also saw the most beautiful chancel in the world. [ppt] This is the Chapel of the Transfiguration in Grand Teton National Park. This simple and small wooden chapel does not have beautiful stained glass or luxurious decorations. There is a big window behind the altar and that’s enough to make the chapel one of the most beautiful places in the world. [ppt] This is the scenery you see through that window. The magnificent mountains God has created. Sitting in a pew and gazing on the altar makes you feel that you are in a holy place where all creation is praising God. In that chapel, you don’t have to close your eyes to pray. Perhaps it’s best to open your eyes to pray. Seeing, feeling and being in God’s wonderful hands. This experience has helped me to meditate on today’s scripture.

A Shameless Friend

In the scripture, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray. Jesus offered a three-part teaching. A model of prayer, a parable about prayer and some sayings about prayer. “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 indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” We all know this prayer. Right? This beautiful prayer is a model of prayer.

Then, Jesus offered a strange parable, the parable of the shameless friend. Jesus said, “Imagine what would happen if you went to a friend in the middle of the night and said, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread. An old friend traveling through just showed up, and I don’t have a thing on hand.’ If I should do the same thing to you, what would your reaction be? Since all of you are good Christians, I bet you would generously help your pastor and maybe, Diane Newman-Goins would make a few calls to church members and maybe call a meeting of the SPRC afterward. Surprise midnight visitors are not really welcomed today unless they have an urgent issue because no one likes being woken up in the middle of the night for no reason. I know this through experience.

Last year, Juhee and I went on a camping trip with my friend. On the second day, we had a nice dinner with a wonderful dessert, which was a sweet watermelon. A cold slice of watermelon on a hot summer day was a blessing. The issue was that the watermelon made Juhee need to go to the restroom in the middle of the night and of course, she didn’t want to go there alone in the dark, so she woke me up in the middle of the night. We walked through the forest and did our business and came back to bed. When I was just about to fall asleep, Juhee quietly called me again and we walked through the forest in the middle of the night again. Juhee woke me up four times that night and the sun was rising when we came back to our tent the final trip. If my friend did the same thing, I would probably pretend that I was in a deep sleep and try to

ignore him. Waking up in the middle of the night is not pleasant. So I can sympathize with the reaction of the friend in our story.

The friend answered from his bed, “Don’t bother me. The door’s locked; my children are all down for the night; I can’t get up to give you anything.” But Jesus continues, “But let me tell you, even if he won’t get up because he is a friend, if you stand your ground, knocking and waking all the neighbors, he’ll finally get up and get you whatever you need.” Unlike today, in the culture of the biblical world, hospitality was an important virtue and obligation, so there was no question that hospitality must be extended when a guest arrived, even at midnight. The woken-up friend would incur dishonor if he failed to help his friend in this essential obligation. So Jesus was saying that he would respond because of social pressure at the very least. Of course, if someone did the same thing today, he or she would soon meet police officers, so be careful.

Many Christians misinterpret this parable to say, “like this shameless friend, keep praying until your prayer is answered.” However, what Jesus really wanted to do was tell his disciples about the God to whom we pray. In this parable, Jesus was saying that God can be trusted to respond to our prayers. If a reluctant friend would respond to a plea, how much more so will God who wants to give us what is good and life-giving! With trust in the generous and good Father, Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” Our generous heavenly Father listens to us. So pray!

Are All Our Prayer to be Answered?

However, I have to admit that I am still struggling with Jesus’ teaching. Jesus said, “For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” Jesus sounds like whatever we pray for will be answered and we will get what we pray for. But our experience often contradicts Jesus’ words. So often, we have asked and not received; we have searched and not found. In spite of our most fervent prayers for their health and safety, we have lost loved ones to cancer and senseless accidents. As a pastor, I receive many prayer requests and pray for my beloved church members, friends and neighbors. But I see many unanswered prayers. In spite of the fervent prayers of the people of Ukraine, the tragic war continues while our compassion and interest in Ukraine have rapidly diminished. If God is like a loving parent who desires to give what is good and life-giving (11:11-13), why do so many prayers seem to go unanswered?

There is no simple answer to this question. In fact, there is no perfect answer to this question. So, I shared my concern with my clergy friends and one seasoned pastor shared this experience. His church is a Korean immigrant church in Flushing, New York. As you know, the life of an immigrant is tough. I mean really, really challenging, especially, in a place like New York. So, his church opens daily at 6 a.m. for people to begin their day with prayer because they cannot live on without prayer. They pray together out loud during the time of prayer. My friend also prays with them. He told me that he doesn’t know what they are praying for or if their prayers are answered or not. But prayer itself is what they need. As he prays together loudly with his congregation, he sometimes forgets about what he is praying for and simply feels the presence of God who listens to and cares for God’s children. Maybe our prayer has not been answered in the way we wanted. However, we can still live on and rejoice because our heavenly Father keeps walking with us and empowering us as we continue on our earthly journey. Prayer

is an invitation to this relationship with a loving God who wants to give us life, and who continues to work tirelessly for our redemption and that of all creation.

Should we continue to pray even if some of our prayers seem to go unanswered? Yes. Because Jesus tells us to do so. Can I bring my personal needs in prayer? Yes, because Jesus tells us to do so. We dare to be shameless in our prayers, to keep bringing our needs and hopes to our God because Jesus tells us to do so and because we trust in God who loves us. We can keep praying because we believe, “in all things God works for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Open the window in your heart!

[ppt] Let's go back to the altar in the Chapel of the Transfiguration in the Grand Teton National Park. I felt the presence of God in that moment because of the beautiful mountain I could see through the window. But does God live only in the Grand Teton Mountains? God is everywhere, so we can feel and see God's hand wherever we are. Praying is an act of opening a window into our hearts and seeing God who is here with us. Effectiveness is not the top priority. Rather, prayer invites us into a deeper relationship with God. Sometimes, we need to close our eyes to see beyond what we can see, God's redeeming hands for us and the world. So, my friend, be bold and shameless in your prayer. Bring your needs and hopes to God and be with God in prayer. Amen.