

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

July 25, 2010  
*17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Luke 11:1-13

## Breathing Lessons

Do you know where your green dot is?

Last summer in a sermon about prayer, I borrowed a gimmick from another church and handed out green sticker dots for everyone who was present to place someplace where they'd see them regularly to remind them to pray. People put them on their alarm clocks, on their bathroom mirrors, in their cars, on their computers – wherever they wanted to. Later in the fall I gave them to Confirmation Class members. Cell phones were the common choice in that group. The one I had on my computer lost its stick recently. It keeps falling off onto my desk into the clutter. I probably need a replacement one. Because in the rush of daily activities, the busy-ness of my life, the demands and the challenges and the distractions, I sometimes forget to pray.

I suspect I'm not alone in this. I suspect that we all need encouragement in prayer, a refresher course every now and then. I suspect that when Jesus' disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray," their request was motivated by knowing that their prayer life could stand with some improvement. And they saw in Jesus what they wanted—an intimate relationship with God, a closeness that they were lacking. *Lord, teach us to pray.*

Now there are many ways to pray, and no one formula for prayer covers all possibilities. There is no ritual that guarantees divine obedience to our desires; no incantation ensures that we'll get what we want. But there are patterns and practices, disciplines which nurture us as disciples to be more like Jesus in our praying and in our living. Which means that at the very least we will remember to pray, and not give up on it.

Teach us to pray. Jesus probably thought to himself, *That's like saying, "teach us to breathe."* For Jesus, prayer was as natural and instinctive as breathing. God was as near to him as his breath, in and out, always flowing, sustaining life. I imagine him thinking, *prayer is to the soul as breath is to the body*, but then patiently offering his disciples what to him would have been like lessons in how to breathe.

He gave them—and us—some words, and behind those precious words there is a pattern for prayer: praise, petition, confession. Behind the pattern is an attitude: adoration and humility, a knowledge of who we really are as we stand before God. Behind the attitude is the deep human desire to know God, to fill the God-shaped void in each human soul, to love and be loved by God. And then Jesus told some stories with one main theme: persistence. Don't give up. Keep at it. Even when the situation seems hopeless and no response seems to be forthcoming, keep praying. Just do it.

And expect to be heard. And expect God to answer. Frederick Buechner comments on Jesus' illustrations which teach persistence in prayer. He says Jesus tells us that

God is like a friend you go to borrow bread from at midnight. The friend tells you in effect to drop dead, but you go on knocking anyway until finally he gives you what you want so he can go back to bed again. . . . And even a stinker, Jesus says, won't give his own child a black eye when he asks for peanut butter and jelly. . . . Be importunate, Jesus says—not because you have to beat a path to God's door before

he'll open it, but because until you beat the path, maybe there's no way of getting to your door. *(Wishful Thinking, pp. 70-71, 1973, Harper & Row, New York)*

And Kathleen Norris likewise ponders the mystery of prayer, and the relationship between our asking and God's responsiveness. She reflects,

Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine. To be made more grateful, to be able to see the good in what you have been given instead of always grieving for what might have been. People who are in the habit of praying—and they include the mystics of the Christian tradition—know that when a prayer is answered, it is never in the way that you expect. *(Amazing Grace, pp. 60-61, 1998, Riverhead Books, New York)*

Never? Do you mean to tell me that I'm not in charge of the universe? Prayer teaches humility, doesn't it?

And that's because prayer is how we deepen our relationship with God, and the deeper our relationship with God, the more we know how small and needy we are, how great and wonderful God is, and how blessed we are to be loved and cared for by the One who is in charge. The more we pray, the truer our understanding of our place in the universe. The more we pray, the more we "get it" that we have a part to play in God's dream, God's mission, God's plan, God's will. The more we pray, the more we grow to be like Jesus. And the more like Jesus we become, the more our life itself becomes our prayer.

Breathe in. . . God give us life. Breathe out. . . God sustains our daily living. Prayer does not require eloquent words. One of the most ancient prayers of the church is known as the Jesus prayer. It's a prayer which is repeated over and over in rhythm with one's breathing. Pay attention to your breathing and as you inhale, pray, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," and as you exhale, "have mercy on me, a sinner." (We could have a giant Lamaze class here, and breathe in rhythm together, or you could try it on your own!) "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." There's nothing magical about the words; you might choose instead an even shorter phrase to accompany you through the day: Holy Spirit, fill me. Give me strength, O Christ. Father, show me your love. A breath prayer can be thought or said in a single breath, and praying in this way helps us experience what Paul wrote about in the letter to the Romans, that the Spirit prays in us "with sighs too deep for words." (Rom 8:26) (Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 1995, pp. 47-48, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville)

It is the Spirit who breathes in us, the Spirit who gives life. Last night I had the pastoral privilege of meeting our newest and youngest member of the church family when she was just 3 hours old. Her little eyes looked at me and wandered around as newborn eyes do, and I was struck by all that she was experiencing for the very first time - light, and something to look at; her mother's skin, and her first taste of milk; smells and unmuffled sounds; air going into her lungs, cold and fresh and amazing. Life in the world can be shocking, and wondrous, and scary--we learn all that in those first few hours. Learning to breathe, and to keep breathing through times of fear and anxiety, is what keeps us alive. Learning to pray, and to keep praying even when God's silence is deafening, is what keeps our spirits alive.

Prayer is the language of faith, but it is a language beyond words. The words which Jesus gave us show us the way, but we need to walk that way to draw nearer to God. So he

tells us to ask, to search, to knock, to be active in pursuing a relationship with God. That is what we need most of all. All our petitions, all our desires, all our needs are incorporated into that one great need. Ask, and you will receive, he promises. Search, and you will find, Knock, and the door will be opened. God will give the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit will provide the intimate relationship with God which answers all our needs.

For prayer is simply being in touch with God. It is not, as writer Avery Brooke comments, “a little trimming on life, an extra, a luxury—it is the place and time and means for God the Holy Spirit to break through to us and teach us how to transform our lives and our world.” (“Running out of Time,” in *Weavings*, vol xiii, no. 3, p. 7) Prayer is relationship, it is intimacy, it is the way we know God and know that we are known by God. Prayer is how we learn that God is as near to us as our very breath, even in a culture that moves at a breathless pace.

*Lord, teach us to pray*, Jesus’ disciples asked. I am forever grateful that they did. For when I experience the pastoral privilege of visiting people at the end of their lives, the words Jesus taught are very often a link to their relationship with God, a touchstone which reminds them of how God has been with them throughout their lives. The words of our Lord’s prayer often resonate even when other communication fails. I say the Lord’s prayer, and they say it with me, and the tears which fill our eyes are a sign that we have felt God’s presence with us.

Remember to breathe; remember to pray. God be with us all.