

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 17C, July 24, 2016
Luke 11:1-13**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

There is an old adage that says: "Be careful what you pray for..." Many years ago, at a time when I was working my tail off trying to dance as much as possible and still make financial ends meet, I can remember thinking in a moment of sheer exhaustion: "I have to find a way to slow down..." I was running from task to task... from admin job to dance class to dance rehearsal to teaching commitment... constantly stressed about whether I'd be able to buy groceries and if I'd have time cook anything anyway. "I really need to slow down..." I thought, without any idea how I might actually accomplish it. But still, in my heart and in my soul, I knew that my body needed a break.

Not long after, I landed a jump in a dance rehearsal on the side of my foot and went down. I sat for a few minutes, letting the shock-induced nausea pass and then, foolishly, I finished the rehearsal! A day or 2 later, after cancelling out of dance rehearsals and classes, and as I travelled to my downtown admin job on the bus because hobbling along my normal walking route was far too slow and painful on a badly sprained ankle, I thought: "well... I guess I'm officially slowed down... not exactly what I had in mind, God... but I suppose I have to admit, even grudgingly, to the answered prayer..." I hadn't even been consciously aware I'd been praying through the fog of exhaustion... Be careful what you pray for...

Today we hear about prayer from Jesus. In response to the desire of his first disciples, Jesus teaches us a simple prayer: "Father, hallowed by 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." It is, of course, Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer... a stripped down version compared to the one we're much more familiar with from Matthew's Gospel. Here in Luke, the Lord's Prayer is particularly down to earth... heaven is never mentioned, not as God's home, nor as place to imitate with the fulfillment of God's will. Instead Jesus teaches us to pray with the simple address: "Father"; the simple desire: "Your kingdom come"; simple forgiveness, as we forgive others; and the simple request not to experience trial. The words are simple and so are the concepts behind them. No drama. No big words. No fancy theology. Just the basics of what we need for fullness of life.

Jesus then goes on to offer the assurance that God answers prayer. No fuss; no muss. He begins with a parable of a neighbour who the disciples know would never withhold basic hospitality for a fellow villager in need. To do so would bring shame and it would be unimaginable in a Galilean village. (NIB, 236) Jesus highlights that the issue is less one of friendship - it wouldn't matter if the one in need was a friend or not. The issue is one of avoiding being shamed for not supplying the neighbour's need. And so the meaning of the parable is clear.

Jesus doesn't leave it at that. Jesus continues to offer even more assurance that God hears our prayers: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." It is remarkably simple. So much so, that

perhaps too often, we fight with all our being not to believe. Somehow, intuitively, we know to be judicious, to be careful what we pray for. We avoid acknowledging the desires of our hearts and the needs of our bodies, even to ourselves. We keep going - in a dance rehearsal or otherwise - even when we are hurt - because it is so vulnerable and uncomfortable to admit our weakness, our need or our desire. As one writer describes, "Asking in the hope that something will be given... puts [us] in the posture of a beggar. Seeking and finding is language common to the quest for wisdom, but it could have wider applications - perhaps even seeking lodging or shelter. Similarly, knocking in the hope of being received somewhere again puts [us] in the posture of the destitute and the homeless." (NIB, 238) And therein lies the challenge. The only thing we need to do to receive the abundance of God's blessing is to ask, to seek, to knock. In other words, we have to make a move. We have to reach out to God in prayer.

In her latest book, *Searching for Sunday: loving, leaving, and finding the church*, Rachel Held Evans writes about reaching out. She is a popular blogger who has become the voice of many Millennials and Gen-X'ers within and beyond the church. She was raised in the buckle of the American Bible Belt, in the heart of conservative evangelicalism, but her book is structured around the 7 sacraments, which should tell you something about her emerging spirituality. It's a great read if you want to find out how many young post-evangelicals appreciate and embrace our Anglican tradition, theology and liturgy. These are the folks who could well, if we are open to it, bring us renewal... though not necessarily by keeping everything the same.

In her section on Communion, Evans writes, "It was the Anglican tradition that reconnected me to the beauty of the Eucharist, as it does for so many." (129) She goes on to tell stories of various church experiences of communion that brought the sacrament to life for her. In a chapter titled "Open Hands," she begins: "I resist it every time. All the way down the aisle and up the steps to the altar I fidget, folding and unfolding my arms, clasping and unclasping my hands, forcing my mouth into a pleasant, inconspicuous smile as my eye greet the faces of the congregants who have gone before me... My knees hit the pillow beneath the altar rail and light from the stained glass dapples my skin. It's as vulnerable a posture as a body can assume: kneeling, hand cupped together and turned out - expectant, empty, exposed - waiting to receive. I resist it every time, this childlike surrender, this public reification of *need*." (142, italics hers). She goes on to describe the importance and meaning of it for her: "Ours is a culture of achievement, of sufficiency, of bootstrap pulling and ladder climbing. We celebrate the winners, the leaders, the do-it-yourselfers. Like any good American, I like to wait until I think I've *earned*. I like to wait until I think I've *deserved*. With giving, I can maintain some sense of power, some illusion of control. But receiving means the gig is up. Receiving means I'm not the boss of what comes into life - be it trial or trouble or unmerited good." (143, italics hers)

Held Evans beautifully expresses the challenge of Jesus' instruction to us today. With the incredible grace and love of God, the only thing we need to do to receive an abundance of blessing is to ask, to seek, to knock. It shouldn't be a challenge at all, receiving out of the bounty of God's goodness and grace, and yet we can only receive if we admit our need. Instead, we tend to be much more comfortable with giving. As Held Evans wrote, "With giving, [we] can maintain some sense of power, some illusion of control." The thing is, when we give out of a desire for power or control, our giving tends to be lacklustre at best. To give joyfully, to give generously, requires that we recognize our blessedness as receivers of God's grace through answered prayer. Indeed, when we recognize just how blessed we are, we can't help but to give -

generously and joyfully! Rather than giving out of poverty or scarcity, when we give as receivers, we give out of an abundance of gratitude.

Such a spirit of generosity born of gratitude begins with our trust in the love and faithfulness of God and in the recognition of our need and the desires of our hearts. It continues through our reaching out to God in prayer and in our openness to paying attention to how God is responding. And finally, as Jesus tells us today, our prayer and our openness finds fulfillment in the gift of the Holy Spirit, who gives us strength and inspiration to continue the journey and begin the process all over again.

May we have confidence in Jesus' teaching and assurances to us today, as beloved children of God and followers in his Way.

May we persevere in prayer, trusting God's faithfulness to respond even in unexpected ways, at unexpected times, and through unexpected people.

May we reach out in our need today - expectant, empty, exposed - receive the sacrament of Jesus' body and blood and know the fullness of God's love.