

Gospel Reflection Proper 12C

July 28, 2013

Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”² He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.³ Give us each day our daily bread.⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”⁵ And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;’⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’⁷ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.⁹ “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Reflection

Jesus, the ultimate teacher, taught first by his life. Certainly his words were saturated with wisdom, goodness and challenging love. But beyond words was how he lived. As they traveled with him, Jesus’ disciples saw over and over that, for him, prayer was the top priority; not a mere spiritual duty or discipline. Prayer was his life and strength, far beyond anything they had experienced before. They went with him to Sabbath worship. At mealtime they joined him in traditional blessings. But more than that, they saw him getting up early to pray or even spending the entire night in prayer and being renewed. Clearly there was more to prayer than ritual worship and blessings and, like so many of us, they hungered for that more while not comprehending that for which they hungered.

Jesus’ disciples were also afraid that they couldn’t pray “right”, as are many of us. Other teachers, they knew, taught their disciples how to pray. John had done so. Some of them had been with John before John pointed them to Jesus. Perhaps they were wondering how the method that John taught compared with what Jesus would teach. Would Jesus’ method “work” better than John’s? But Jesus didn’t teach a method. He taught a lived relationship.

With his usual way of making a point through humor, Jesus gives an example of going to a friend in the middle of the night because you need help. Perhaps he acted it out, dramatizing the knocking and pleading. Maybe he played all the roles, acting the sleepy, grumpy neighbor reluctantly tossing the bread out the door. What a friend won’t give for friendship’s sake, for hospitality’s sake, may be given for the sake of a little peace and quiet. As the laughter died down, perhaps those listening to him began to reflect on Jesus’ persistence in prayer – his taking time when there was no time – to ask, to search, to knock. Perhaps through Jesus’ ham-acting they realized in new ways that prayer could be real – not formula or method.

Look carefully at the “ask . . . search . . . knock” promises. Is there anything in there that suggests that God is a vending machine into which we put prayer, push a button and get what we want? Rather Jesus points us toward his own lived prayer of persistently seeking the Holy Spirit – the ongoing presence of God with, in and through him. Jesus’ sample prayer tells us to take everything – the profound and the mundane to God. Yet he still didn’t get everything he prayed for. Instead he received strength, courage, faith, hope and the ability to trust himself to God even when it seemed as though God abandoned him. Perhaps that is, ultimately, the prayer Jesus is still teaching us to pray.