



Sunday July 24, 2022  
Luke 11:1-13 (Seventh Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Tony Acompañado

As I reflect back on my own life of prayer, the prayers I've heard over the years, and the numerous conversations that I've had about prayer, I can't help but wonder if the vending machine is our primary teacher of prayer. Think about it. We put in the correct change, make our selection, and get what we want. *"For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."* We offer the coins of our wants and needs, our beliefs, our hopes, and our good behavior. And then we tell God what we want expecting to get exactly what we asked for.

And all that works fine – until it doesn't. Vending machines are great until they take your money but give you nothing in return – or they give you trail mix when you selected a chocolate cookie. And consider how we respond when that happens. We get mad. We push the button again and again. We hit or kick the machine. We tip it from side to side. What's going on? We did our part and we expected it to uphold its end of the deal. It's not so different with prayer.

I don't often have many people come to me and ask, "Why was my prayer answered? Why did I receive exactly what I asked for?" Sometimes we ask and receive, search and find, knock and the door opens, but it's interesting to me that nobody ever seems to be concerned with why they get what they ask for. Instead, what people want to know is why they asked but didn't receive, why they searched but didn't find, why they knocked but the door never opened. And the truth is – we all do it.

I can't begin to tell you how many times I've intensely prayed for myself and for others – I've prayed with words, silence, and tears. I've prayed for one more day, for another chance, for the cancer to go away, for death to hold off a little longer, for over not to mean over. I've prayed to be good enough, to matter, to make things better, and for the tragic news not to be true. And with each plea my prayer became more desperate. More coins. Push the button again. *"Please, please, please Father."* But then the moment arrived and my prayers weren't to be answered. *"Ask and it will be given you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you."* That's not just my story. It's your story too. It's the story of everyone who has ever prayed.

I don't know why some prayers seem to be answered while others go unanswered. And sadly, I don't have any good explanations, but I've definitely heard some really bad ones. *"You didn't pray hard enough."* *"You didn't have enough faith."* *"You were asking for the wrong thing."* *"It's all a mystery and someday you'll understand."* *"Everything happens for a reason."* *"Something better is coming."* But I can't believe or accept any of this. Because these are nothing but shallow attempts to reinforce a vending machine understanding of prayer. And we've got to let that go because it's wrong and it hurts people and distorts who and how God is.

When I hear these kinds of explanations, I can't help but remember someone else who prayed – he prayed with words, sweat, and blood. *"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."* And then I also remember that he was crucified the next day. Ask. Search. Knock.

I don't fully understand how prayer works but I do know this much. It's not about the coins. It's not a mechanical process. It's not a transaction. The point of prayer isn't to change God's mind, but to shape ours. If we come to God only to seek information or to receive everything we ask for exactly the way we want it, then we fall short of all God has to offer.



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In the midst of not knowing or understanding, then maybe the best we can do is to echo that disciple's request, "*Lord, teach us to pray.*" Embedded in that request was their admission that there were many things that they didn't understand about prayer. Jesus' response isn't an explanation of prayer or how it works. He doesn't offer a technique, a formula, a routine, or any magic words. He doesn't give us the correct change for the vending machine. Instead, what Jesus does is teach about the One to whom we're praying. He teaches about the character of God. "*When you pray, say:*

*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.*"

God is our creator, and we are his beloved children. That's reality – before we even open our mouths and before we ever offer our coins or make a selection. The relationship already exists. Prayer is about relationship and presence. We're not telling God something that God doesn't already know. We're reminding ourselves of what already is, what always has been, and what always will be.

That relationship means that our life, our existence, our very being, comes from our Father. Jesus speaks of that as daily bread. But too often in life we're convinced that we are or must be independent and self-sufficient. Prayer reminds us that we're dependent – and therefore we need to ask God each day for our daily bread.

But this doesn't mean that we're inadequate, instead, that our adequacy comes not from ourselves but from God. It means that God sustains and nourishes our life. Those lines in the prayer about forgiveness, ours and others – they're about relationship and presence, with God and each other.

If prayer, as Jesus teaches it, really is all about relationship and presence then there's only one answer to every prayer – **God**. And by this I don't just mean that God answers our prayers, but that **God is the answer** – God's presence, life, love, beauty, generosity, compassion, forgiveness, wisdom, justice, and mercy. God gives God's self as the answer to our every prayer. Jesus tells us that. If you, he says, know how to give your kids good things "*how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit.*"

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of prayer is that sometimes we just want to offer our coins and push the button. We don't really want God. We want something from God. We want God to change our circumstances. So, while God can and sometimes does change circumstances, I'm convinced that God, more often than not, changes us. God's self-giving Spirit sustains, nourishes, strengthens, empowers, reassures, and enables us to face the circumstances of life. And we do this, sometimes with joy and gratitude, other times with pain and loss – but always with God.

Author Anne Lamott writes that our two best prayers are, "*help me, help me, help me*" and "*thank you, thank you, thank you.*" I think Jesus would agree.

My friends, I won't pretend that I can answer all the questions each of us has about the "hows" and "whys" of prayer, but what I can do is invite us into a deeper, more honest, and more trusting relationship with God who desires to be known as our loving parent – the provider of all that's good, and the protector of all who are in need. And while this may not give us everything we want; it at least gives us what we most need. Thanks be to God. Amen.