



Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
27 July 2025

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

The great Harry Houdini, master magician and escape artist, once bragged that there wasn't a jail cell in the world he couldn't escape from, provided he could go into the cell dressed in his street clothes and work in complete privacy. A small town in England had built a new jail, which they believed was escape-proof, so they invited Houdini to come and try to break out. Houdini accepted the challenge. They put him in the cell and closed the door. He was left alone. He took off his belt and took from it a tough, flexible steel rod. He went to work on the lock. He worked longer than it had ever taken him before, and he still couldn't get the lock open! As time passed, he was becoming exhausted. He was stumped! Finally, after two solid hours of work, Houdini collapsed from exhaustion. He fell against the door to the cell, and when he did the door swung open! It had been unlocked all the time.

For many of us, our ability to pray to God is mostly hampered by our inability to believe we can, pray to God. Today, a disciple asks Jesus to teach them to pray, as John taught his disciples. The disciples already know a lot of prayers – deep in their memory are prayers recorded and spoken. The book of psalms in the Old Testament is their book of worship and attending synagogue every sabbath would have caused them to know the entire book of the psalms by heart.

Psalm 19: Don't let me do wrong on purpose, Lord, or let sin have control over my life.

Psalm 25: Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.

Psalm 31: In you, Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame;² Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue;

Psalm 51: Have mercy on me, O God.

The disciples knew to depend on the words of the psalms. They were prayers written in praise, in deep grief, in confusion, in joy, in suffering, and in moments of surrender. All moments many of us have known in this life. The disciples already had the words, if not the exact instructions, on how to pray to God. But what they wanted from Jesus, what they saw while watching Jesus pray, was the intimacy, with which Jesus prayed in addressing his father in heaven. The disciples knew God by many majestic names. Every name spoken in whisper with deep reverence. Yahweh. Elohim - The Mighty One. El-Shaddai – All Sufficient God. El Roi – the God who sees. Immanuel – God with us. Never had they heard anyone address the Mighty One as Pater – Father or Abba – daddy. *Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread;^[a] ⁴ and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.*

You know this prayer deep in your memory – so deep that some of us have no idea who first spoke this prayer into our ears. Yet it is there – written in memory, on our hearts, woven into our muscle memory. We so often take it for granted – rushing through it in our morning prayers to get on with our day or in our worship to get to communion and on into our day. Yet, this prayer never lets us go. I have sat next to the bedside of someone so close to the time of death that every breath is measured and still when I begin to pray, "our father, who art in heaven," their breathing will slow and their lips will begin to shape the words Jesus taught us to pray. In a psych hospital, on the edge of the city limits of Salem, OR where patients who came to worship numbered just over 14. One man sat in the front row of the small chapel. I did not know his story or how he came to be a permanent resident of the hospital. He would never look up from his chair. I recognized him the second week for the long thread of drool that would begin as he sat down and hang from the corner of his mouth until worship was finished. I am not sure any word of any sermon I ever preached registered inside his head – did he



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even know I was there? I am not sure that it mattered. Even as we blessed bread and wine – he would not look up. But when we began to pray, “our father, who art in heaven,” his lips would begin to shape the words, and he would use his voice to pray. It would be the only time I would ever hear his voice during my time as chaplain. The woman who will be buried today, who I visited a couple of weeks ago, exhausted from her relentless battle with cancer -still from her hospital bed, surrounded by family, after bread and wine were blessed, “our father, who art in heaven,” and her lips began to shape the words and her voice found strength for the prayer written deep into her soul. Is it simply muscle memory, is it obligation or guilt, is it a hunger for relationship or the intimacy the disciples sought so long ago? Does it matter? Still this prayer Jesus taught, will not let us go.

Earlier this week, I spent a good deal of time searching for Bible verses that promised that our prayers do not go unheard. 1 John 5:14 says, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” Psalm 66:19 says, “but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer.” John 14:14 says, “¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” And Psalm 145:18 says, “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.” And Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” There is no shortage of reminders that God hears our prayers. This should be where I end my sermon today. Let it go, Pastor Christ. I wanted that to be enough.

Except, Jesus goes on today, “*So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to 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.*” It would be much easier if, in the Bible, we would find one Bible verse that says, “your prayers have not gone unanswered.” Jesus literally tells us today: ask, and it will be given to 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. And I am telling you, I wish Jesus would have stopped after he taught the disciples how to pray. Why tell the disciples and us that all who ask, receive, and all who search, find, and all who knock will find an open door? Is that really true Jesus? Because my life says otherwise.

There have been days Lord, I have asked, and searched, and knocked – until my hands bled and my voice went hoarse or so it seemed. So, the pastoral answer is that maybe God answered your prayer in a way you did not expect. Maybe God’s answer to your prayers was exactly the opposite of what you wanted, hoped for. In most Lutheran circles, I am safe from hearing that my faith is not strong enough or that I am not worthy enough for God to answer my prayers. But, still I wonder why Jesus says what he says, “ask, seek, knock.” I would have been okay with Jesus telling us that we “should” ask and seek and knock. What I struggle with is the outcome. Ask, and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. What am I missing Jesus?

It turns out, that prayer, in the end is about surrendering, our power – our hurt, our hunger, our hope – all of it surrendered to God. That is not a word we are often comfortable speaking out loud. But the longer I sat with the words of Jesus, the more convinced I became of this truth. To pray to God means we have come to the last, best, hope we have available to us. The deep, deep love of God for each of us. Not because of what we have done in this life with success or given in offering to our God, but because of who we are in the eyes of God – beloved. Still Jesus tells us to ask, to seek, to knock. But my friends – it seems the door – was never locked. Just ask Houdini. Thanks be to God. Amen.