

Proper 12, Year C
Luke 11: 1-13

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California
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Searching for the Taproot:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Not long after I had been confirmed, I made an appointment with my rector. I had a really important question to ask him – one that had plagued me for some time. I was so nervous about asking that question that I drove around and around the block for fifteen minutes before I even parked my car. When I got to his office, my palms were sweating and my breath was shallow. I was so nervous I couldn't even ask the question. I made up something to ask him, we talked for a while, and I got out of that office as quickly as I could. It took two more appointments before I dared ask the question that brought me there in the first place. Finally, on my third visit, I choked out my question. Even then I didn't dare ask it directly.

The question I asked: How do people pray?

The question I wanted to ask: Teach me to pray.

That's the question the disciples asked Jesus. "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." That was the only request the disciples ever made of Jesus – or at least it is the only request we know about. I wonder what prompted them to make that request. I wonder what was behind the question.

Did they want a prayer that set them apart as a community? A prayer that forged their identity?

If so, what a prayer they got!

A prayer that establishes, from the very first word, their identity as children of God while at the same time linking them to one another as children of the same father.

A prayer that assures them from the first word, they are beloved of God.

A prayer expressing not individual piety but communal longing

"Give **us** each day **our** daily bread"

"Forgive **us** our sins"

"For **we ourselves** forgive everyone indebted to **us**"

"And do not bring **us** to the time of trial"

A prayer that calls for and heralds a new day, a new way of treating one another, a new reign – the reign of God. “Your kingdom come,” Jesus teaches his disciples to pray.

A prayer for daily bread for a community living in hard times – times of famine, debt slavery, and economic dislocation.

A prayer for deliverance from the trials and persecutions people living under Roman rule faced.

Think of it. Jesus offers his disciples a prayer that addresses the concrete realities of their daily life.

What a prayer he gave them.

I wonder, though, if there were more to their request. More than just a request for a prayer specific to their community.

Look at how Luke sets the request. “He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray....”

I wonder if they were asking not so much teach us the hows of prayer, but rather how to pray as Jesus prayed. Perhaps they remembered Jesus’ face as he was transfigured on that mountain. Perhaps they recalled the many times he slipped away to pray.

I think they noticed Jesus had a different relationship with God – a deeper, more intimate one – and they sought to discover the taproot that went deep into the rich soil of Jesus’ relationship with God. I think they wanted such a relationship themselves.

“Lord, teach us to pray.” The disciples were developing an hunger for God. They were asking for more than a prayer. They were asking for a path – a path to the deep connectedness with God they saw in Jesus.

That’s just what Jesus gives them in the parable that follows the prayer. He tells them the story of a man roused from his sleep to welcome a friend into his house. The man searches his larder and discovers he has no bread. How can he be gracious and hospitable if he has nothing to offer his friend? How can he meet his friend’s needs without a loaf of bread?

He goes to his neighbor and friend, knocks on the door, and asks for help. The neighbor responds, “No way. You’re waking the whole household.” The man continues to knock at the door and call at the window. I can imagine he raised quite a racket. I can imagine he made quite a fuss. What a thing to do in a small community! If he had done that in St. Anthony Park, the part of St. Paul where I grew up, the neighbors would have talked for years.

But that did not deter him. His friend was hungry and tired. His friend needed his daily bread. He was ready to risk a little embarrassment for the sake of his friend. He was ready to violate the strict code of honor and shame that governed his culture. Because of his shamelessness, his neighbor got up, opened the door, and gave him bread. Think of it – the friend pounding on the door was ready to risk his own vulnerability for someone else’s hunger. He was ready to set aside his comfort, his position, his reputation to meet someone else’s need. He was ready to risk the neighbors’ raised eyebrows and hushed conversations.

Think of it. Think about the response to his shamelessness. He knocked and the door was opened; he sought help and he found it; he asked for bread and he received it. How does Jesus put it – how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

That path Jesus provides his disciples – is a path paved with the stones of risk and daring, of vulnerability and openness – openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

“Lord, teach us to pray,” the disciple asked.

What a way of prayer he taught them – a way of openness, vulnerability and risk, a way of readiness and hope, a way of deep connectedness with God and one another.

What a way of prayer he taught them. What a gift he gave them – a taproot into groundedness in God.

“Lord, teach us to pray.”