

Travel Stories: *The Friend* - wk 2

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - July 19, 2020
Luke 11:1-13 *The Message paraphrase* (Adapted from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*)

We're continuing our message series today looking at some of Jesus' conversations in the Gospel of Luke, while on the road from Galilee where Jesus lived through Samaria and on to Jerusalem. He covers diverse territory with diverse people as He tells these stories.

As a main resource for this series, I'll be drawing from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*. Eugene Peterson writes, "Life is personal. By definition. All parts of it: language, work, friends, family, flowers and vegetables, rocks and hills - (the Flint Hills), Father, Son and Holy Spirit - everything."

Jesus is our primary witness to the fact that God made life personal us: FOR persons, FOR people. For people like you and me. Jesus said, "**I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly**" (John 10:10) - that's not accidental and that's not mere survival rations, but abundance, extravagant life.

Jesus is our primary evidence that God who made life personal is also personal. When we deal with God, we are not dealing with a mystical feeling. God is not a force. In life we are dealing personally with Jesus, who is dealing personally with us and showing us our Heavenly Father who loves us.

Everything we know about God we know through Jesus. And Jesus is personal - a living body and soul, who eats bread and fish and drinks water and wine. Jesus speaks and listens. Jesus is born into a family whose names we know, and has a personal name. In the Bible we see Jesus weep. Jesus gets angry. Jesus touches and is touched. Jesus bleeds when he is cut. Jesus dies. Jesus is totally at home in his body and with his family. Jesus shows us God is personal.

What Jesus tells us is that we don't become more pleasing or more acceptable to God by becoming personal, less human, less physical, less emotional, less involved with our families, less associated with undesirable people. We don't become more spiritual by becoming less personal. We don't become more spiritual by trying to be less human. The spiritual life is a personal life, because God is personal.

Last week we saw how Jesus' Good Samaritan story creates neighbors of us all, neighbors to men and women we never had any idea were our neighbors. We had no idea they were our neighbors because we may have used language to stereotype them into less than human cardboard caricatures. "Samaritan," for instance, was the term used in the Good Samaritan story or we may use some other terms for dismissal.

Once we have dehumanized people by a simple trick of language, it doesn't even occur to us to love them. How

can you love a piece of cardboard? I think of “bad driver” as a common label we might use. When we’re mad at a “bad driver,” they’re not a human with family and friends and needs and concerns. They’re simply a “bad driver” and no one will fault us for being angry at that cardboard cut out/stereotype person.

You see obeying God’s command to love our neighbors is easier when most of the people we don’t know or don’t like are excluded from the command. But Jesus’ story re-humanizes, re-personalizes, re-*neighbors* us to everyone we meet.

Today’s story then that Jesus tells as He walks a long brings God into personal focus. Jesus repersonalizes God. We depersonalize people by stereotyping them. We depersonalize God by generalizing Him - that’s God as an idea, God as a force, God as a dogma or doctrine to defend. But since we can’t love an idea, a force or a doctrine, we effectively remove love from the biblical command “Love God” and replace it with what? Verbs such as “acknowledge God,” “respect God,” “consider God,” “defend God,” “study God” - all verbs that require little, if any, personal relationship. With cardboard cut-outs around us and a doctrine of God that depersonalizes God, we Christians can find ourselves very religious and very much without love.

Jesus’ teaching on prayer, I see, is the cure for the religious heart without love. It’s like the atrophied heart of

the religious lawyer in the first story: the religious leader who was looking for a loophole to loving his neighbor. Jesus personalizes God for those who've only have religion. Jesus keeps us personal in our approach to God, personal in our prayers. Jesus rehumanizes the people around us and personalizes our Heavenly Father.

Get this. If you've ever been asked to pray in public and thought, *"I don't know how to pray like that,"* then you know the risk we face of losing touch with the personal-ness of prayer and the personal-ness of God.

Children pray in spontaneous honesty. If I ask my kids to pray at the dinner table, I don't know what they're going to end up praying for, but it will be spontaneous and honest. But adults, we sometimes think we need the right religious language to pray properly, especially if we are going to pray where others will hear us. We think we need the right religious sounding phrases or cliches. But there is nothing cliché or borrowed in Jesus' story. Jesus gets us immediately and personally present to our loving Heavenly Father.

The disciples have asked Jesus to teach them to pray, **"Lord, teach us to pray"** (Luke 11:1). And Jesus responds by giving them the Lord's Prayer and then telling them a story.

Note the disciples have been living with Jesus for something like three years, watching what He does and

listening to what He says, and they have come to the realization that following Him means cultivating a relationship with His Father the way they observe Jesus doing it. They want to figure out the personal way of living with God that they've seen Jesus doing. Jesus' response is then to give them a brief model prayer, telling a simple parable, and then connecting them together with comments that get us thinking and imagining about this personal relationship with God.

The model prayer that Jesus gives them is surprisingly brief. We looked at a longer version in Matthew, but this time Luke records Jesus giving an even shorter version of the Lord's Prayer. With a prayer so short, but powerful, I can understand if Jesus disciples probably asked Him to teach them to pray more than once, and so this is a time when Jesus' taught them a shorter version and this time probably to highlight "daily bread" as central to the prayer and their relationship with God. We will look at that in a minute.

As Jesus begins to teach, He has barely started before He is finished. 38 words and then it's over. Class dismissed. Schools out. What's going on? Why not a graduate-level seminar on prayer? Why not a full weekend prayer retreat? But then there is no evidence that the disciples felt shortchanged.

If you think about it, the things that matter most to us are not learned in a classroom: things like walking and talking.

Things like loving and hoping and believing. We require teachers for these, but they're not learned in schools. We need to be around the people who do it, who are engaged in them and a little ahead of us in the process. That is why I love older people and especially older Christians that I know. Trying to learn to live this personal life with God without being around older Christians who are a little ahead of me, would be like going to school to learn to ride a bike, but a school where no one has ever seen or touched a bicycle.

Friendships with people who know that God walks with us and talks with us is the best way I've learned to pray and listen to God, whether or not we ever actually have a conversation about prayer. Attending a workshop on prayer to me is too formulaic, it's not how we learn to pray and relate personally to God. Praying requires the kind of education Jesus gives here: prayer/story/comment.

The prayer/parable/comment combination makes it clear that prayer is personal speech. The prayer model begins with a personal address: "**Father**". And the parable also begins with a personal address: "**Friend**". They are not "**To whom it may concern,**" they are personal. They're how Jesus prays and we His friends get to listen in.

And most amazingly, Jesus' prayer is a conversation between a Father and child. I love this. Prayer is always personal. The first word in the prayer is "**Father,**" the last line in the parable features "**Father.**" This prayer/story/

comment is personal, not a seminar or public lecture. Jesus teaches us to get personally involved in the actions of our Heavenly Father who acts personally in our lives.

The use of “friend” also makes this personal. Note the term “friend” is used for every person in the story. Three friends.

To be told when Jesus is talking about prayer that prayer is learned in the language of personal relationship of Father and Friend! This is wonderful news for us. It then can never be a matter of getting the right words in the right order. Prayer can never be a matter of good behavior or skillful manipulation of God. Prayer is always personal. And we must keep it personal, or it isn't prayer. Again, it's not formulaic, it's personal.

I love the idea that prayer is a conversation with God. Not a formula or proper language, but us talking with our Heavenly Father in a relationship. And here's the last thing: there's a dailyness to this personal prayer. Note that bread is prominent in both the prayer and the parable. Eugene Peterson says Luke's shortened version of the Lord's Prayer brings bread to the center. The third of five petitions is “**Give us this day our daily bread,**” so it stands out just a little from the others.

It then corresponds to the prominence of bread in the parable (“**three loaves of bread**”). It seems Luke is teaching us that prayer deals with what is basic and daily

for our humanity. It is not an add-on. Prayer is what we do daily, not what we do after we do our daily things.

Give me bread, lend me three loaves, and “pass the fish” in the last story. All daily and daily needs. Jesus says God is personally interested in our daily lives, our daily needs, yet we sometimes still think prayer is about an otherworldly thing. But I’m so glad our Father is interested in the dailyness of our lives.

I think I used to think God was interested in getting us to a spiritual high, where we could feel on *cloud nine* with God. I remember going to summer camp or Christian retreats as an adult and feeling like all of life was supposed to feel like I felt there away from the worries of the world, filling my day with worship, and conversations about God. I thought life was supposed to feel like that camp high all the time. Now I think instead that life with our Father feels like life in the midst of daily needs, daily needs our Father is personally involved in and very interested in. God is very interested in our daily bread.

Being human means our needs are always a bit beyond our human capabilities. Yes, we can grow food and work hard and provide for ourselves, *thank you very much*. But we also have stories of people who had everything they ever wanted and still found life empty without good personal relationships of God and neighbor. *Life is personal: that’s a daily thing*. “**Love God and love your neighbor**” are how we are made. *Father, give us our*

daily bread. And Friend, lend us three loaves. Then Jesus concludes his teaching on prayer with this: **“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!”** (Luke 11:13).

By introducing the term “Holy Spirit” into the conversation, Jesus further connects this prayer with each and every day of our lives. Each and every hour, each and every detail of our lives. How? God’s Holy Spirit is God’s way of being personally with us in all our listening and speaking and acting and living and breathing. God in all the particulars of our lives and our friends’ lives and neighbors’ lives. The Holy Spirit is God completely and personally present with us.

And we’d want it no other way. Even if it’s in the middle of the night, when we come knocking, we want God the Father to answer. Personally present in all the particulars at all times of our lives. Jesus says He is by His Holy Spirit. Jesus says He will and He wants to, because He is our Father and Friend.

Thank You God that You don’t offer us an on again, off again, relationship with You that sometimes our father and our friends have offered us. Thank You that You are always present by Your Holy Spirit and always desire to give us the good of life and the promise of eternal life with You in Your Kingdom of Heaven. In Jesus Name, Amen.