

Sermon: You've Got a Friend

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Scripture: Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13

Ah, the great Carole King. When Weston was a baby, we used to listen to a lot of Carole King. She had this children's program a few decades ago called, "Really Rosie," and, when Weston was crying in the backseat of the car on long car rides, sometimes the only thing that would calm him down was if I sang, "Alligators All Around" until he quieted. This week, as I prepared my sermon, I was reminded of those early days of motherhood as Carole's voice came back to me. But this time, it wasn't "Alligators All Around" that came to me, it was "You've Got a Friend." You know how it goes, right:

You just call out my name
And you know, wherever I am
I'll come runnin'
To see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you have to do is call
And I'll be there
You've got a friend

This is the song that came to me this week as, prompted by our lectionary passages, I've done a *lot* of thinking about prayer. The words, "You've Got a Friend" constantly circling round and round in my head. But why would one of my least favorite Carole King songs be sticking in my head while I'm thinking about prayer? I should be asking the pertinent questions: How do we pray? When do we pray? What do we pray? What even is this thing we call prayer? Maybe I should be asking the tough stuff like: Does prayer change God or does prayer change us? Does prayer work in the ways we think it does? Does God need us to pray to change God's mind? But, instead, I kept hearing, "You've Got a Friend."

It might surprise you to know that one of the things I struggled with most as a pastor early in my call to ministry was prayer. You wouldn't think this would be a tough thing, but for me it was. I've said before that I didn't grow up churched. We went to church, sporadically, for mostly brief periods, but I can say that I grew up in a praying house. Every night before I went to sleep, I said the old standard: "Now I lay me down to sleep," but beyond that, my prayers were pretty wordless and pained. When bad things would happen or if I was worried, I would try to pray, but the words just weren't there. I was afraid of doing it wrong. It was the great Howard Thurman who said in his first pastoral visit to a dying person that he felt he was, "straining to reach God." For me, for a long time, that was what prayer looked like. It wasn't usually said aloud. It was often desperate. It was always straining. And so, for me, something that is supposed to bring calm and peace, I often brought me a bit of worry as I struggled to find that calm in prayer.

Looking back, I think the point of prayer in my life at that point was to keep me searching because when you really think about it, a large part of a prayerful life is searching for God—for relationship with God. We want God to hear us. We want to believe there is something more than this life and that that "something more" is controlled by "something" good, something more loving, merciful, just, and gracious than anything we've encountered here. We want to believe that God, whatever God is, hears us and will answer us. We desire, with all our hearts, to see God and if we cannot see God, then we want to be assured that when we speak into the ether, God is compassionately and actively listening.

And we aren't the only ones who desire these things, the disciples did as well. They had seen Jesus draw away, presumably alone, to a certain place to pray. When he was done praying, the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, teach us how to pray as John taught his disciples." What should they say? How should they address God? When should they pray? They want the details.

At first, Jesus's answer is pretty simple: he gives them a basic formula to use when they pray. That formula, in many of the same words, is still used today. We say the prayer Jesus taught his disciples every Sunday, after consistory meetings, and I often draw on it during our weekly prayer time.

First, he wants them to refer to God as "Abba," or father. He wants them to understand God as a relational God who has given them life and whose children they are. He invites them to think of God as one who sees us as family, one to whom we are intricately bound and who holds us as closely as a parent holds a child.

Second, he tells them to say two phrases really implore God to be God: "hallowed be your name" and "Your kingdom come." Now, pleading though these phrases may seem, we don't need to remind God of this do we? God already knows what God is in charge of. So I started wondering why are we reminding God to be God? I think it's a reminder for us. Because it situates us as finite human beings in the face of an infinite God. We are admitting here that, ultimately, we are subordinate to God as God's beloved children. It's a reminder to disciples to remember God's power to be in charge of their lives—and that all we have and all that will ever be is because of God. One day, the vision before us will be one of God's kingdom, which has come, not our own.

Then, the prayer turns to our concerns: food (daily bread), forgiveness (for us and for those indebted to us), and faithfulness (do not bring us into the time of trial, but help us be faithful to you by avoiding what is evil and loving what is good). These are the petition part of the prayer and they refer not just to individual life, but also the life of the church: communal life.

Jesus ends his prayer sort of abruptly – no amen is mentioned here – and he turns to a parable. And one that is a bit odd, at least as translated by the NRSV. "Suppose one of you has a friend," he says, "and you go to him to ask for three loaves of bread." The reason you want this bread is that you have a friend who has arrived and you have nothing to offer him to fulfil your duty to show hospitality, something taken very seriously

during this period in history. The friend, instead of helping you fulfil this responsibility, instead tells you to go away. His whole household is asleep and he refuses to get up to get you anything. Your friend, in doing this, is violating the bonds of hospitality by denying you this simple request he can so easily accommodate. He may be able to sleep knowing that, but you, knowing how important it is to be a good host to your *visiting* friend, *must* persist in this request. Jesus says that in so doing, your friend will get up and give you the bread because you have, in fact, persisted.

Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and a door will be opened for you." Everyone, he says, who asks receives, who searches finds, and who knocks has the door opened.

Then, Jesus goes on to underscore that, unlike your friend who reluctantly helped you or a parent who doesn't quite give a child what it is they need, God is keen to give assistance. God, your heavenly father and mother, your loving creator, is committed to responding to those in need.

What Jesus means for the disciples to understand from this parable isn't that they will get all that they ask for no matter what it is. God is not your magical genie in a bottle who grants your every want, but God is paying attention to your needs. God will answer your prayer, though perhaps not as you expect.

What Jesus is underscoring here is the importance of persistence and consistency in prayer life and how that will deepen your relationship with God. Jesus has and will go on to model this kind of prayer throughout his life and teachings. He withdraws to pray in deserted places (Luke 5:16), he goes to pray on mountain tops (6:12 and 9:18). He prayed before he chose the apostles, when he fed the 5,000, he prayed during the last supper, in the garden the night before he died, and then on the cross, itself. Prayer was always with Jesus. He is telling the disciples (and us) how important that prayer should be not just during difficult times, but at all times.

Cynthia Jarvis wrote, “If God is and has chosen to be known by us in the one who is teaching us to pray, then prayer becomes a conversation with one who is our friend.” Jesus, Jarvis writes, “is that friend for those who enter into this holy conversation,” that is prayer. God’s desire for us to be in relationship with God is modeled for us in Jesus. Jesus, this man whose life and teachings we follow, gives us a personification of God in part, perhaps, to make that relationship easier to enter into. In prayer, if we imagine that we are talking to our friend, Jesus, I think that makes prayer a whole lot easier to engage in. Prayer in this way becomes then like a conversation between friends, ones who know what it is like to hurt—us because we actively hurt now and Jesus because we know he has cried out in torment as he gave his life on the cross. God, in Jesus, is not some remote, far away diety in the sky who looks down on us or plays us like pawns in some cosmic game of chess. In Jesus, we glimpse a God who wants us to feel as comfortable in prayer as friends in deep conversation. This conversation of prayer has the power to lift our burdens, even if it doesn’t solve them. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve called on a friend for a chat, and even if they couldn’t fix the problem, the comfort that conversation brings is not to be underestimated.

In her famous song, “You’ve Got a Friend,” Carole King sings this verse, which this week sounds to me very much like something Jesus might sing to us if he were a singer:

If the sky above you
Grows dark and full of clouds
And that old north wind begins to blow
Keep your head together
And call my name out loud
Soon you'll hear me knockin' at your door

And so I suppose the only question left to ask is this: what will happen when Jesus comes knockin’ at our door? Will we stay in bed, refusing his friendship, suffering alone

and in silence? Or will we open that door and let Jesus in, sit down with him, and engage in that beloved conversation with the greatest friend anyone could ever know?

I'll leave it to you to decide.

Amen.