

Psalm 85

Luke 11:1-13

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

July 24, 2022

More Than Enough

It's good to be here with you all this morning. I'm happy to report that not only did we have a wonderful week at the Montreat Youth Conference as you've already heard reported a little bit from Morgan and Kelsey, but flights were mostly on time, there were no blunders with our rental car, I even got to meet a celebrity at the airport, (ask me about that later), and most importantly we made it home safe and sound last night after a full and holy week. But can someone do me a special favor and remind me that the next time I take youth to a youth conference across the country with a packed schedule each day not to try and write a sermon for the day after I get back? 😊 Please and thank you. 😊

But I am grateful to be here with you this morning. I am here also very aware that it is my last Sunday with you for 3 months as I take a sabbatical. I'm also starting this time away as I celebrate 10 years of ministry with you on August 1st. And I'm beginning this time having just come back listening to and worshiping with hundreds of teenagers and adults who were willing to engage with one another across differences respectfully and honestly and to be the Church together. I got to hear them fill a room with songs of our faith with one night almost blowing the rafters off the roof singing "This Little Light of Mine" with such conviction as I've never heard before. We were invited to sing it no longer as a cute Sunday school song but with the challenge and deep belief that we will all do our part to resist evil and greed... this little light of mine, I'm going to LET IT SHINE. They sang it out from the heart. I wish you could have all been there.

When we arrived last Sunday night after a long day of travel, I ran into several people I knew and have not seen in years. One of them was a college aged student and the daughter of a dear friend and colleague of mine named Natalily. She was also at Montreat working with the kids club program providing childcare for the younger children at summer camp. She knew we had had a long day of travel and that I would be feeling the pain of the early wake-up call in the morning. That three hour time change is no joke in the morning when you fly east.

When I woke up Monday morning, peeling myself out of bed to start getting ready for the day for breakfast at 8AM (5AM here), I woke up to a text message that said, "Irene, I have a coffee for you. I know it's still early. Let me know where I can drop it off."-Natalily.

Honestly, I hope I'm raising my children to be like this one day but this college aged student brought me coffee from a local Black Mountain coffee shop and dropped it off for me around 7 in the morning. As exhausted as I was that first morning, my day started with a flood of emotions at how blessed I am to have COMMUNITY almost everywhere I go. People who show up for you and care for you. It could have been because I was tired, but this little act brought me to tears. Through a cup of coffee, I physically felt the abundance in my life. It was a great way to start out a conference with the theme "More than Enough."

The week continued with abundance in so many ways, and I continue to be grateful. And so, as I listened to a keynote message and sermon every day and was inspired in different ways throughout the week, when I finally sat down with the lectionary text for this Sunday about prayer, I suddenly heard and saw something I had never really noticed before.

Now before I get there, I want to name that this particular passage can be tricky and that it probably has been preached to you and you might read it primarily as saying that if you are truly faithful and believe, if you ask, if you seek, if you knock and come to God honestly with your prayers that they will ALL be answered. "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" Jesus says. And then in Luke's gospel it goes into the persistence of the friend who needs food in the middle of the night for a guest and comes knocking at your door and you're like "I'm not getting up for you" but they keep persisting and knocking and so you give up and you give in and you give. And the implication is that this analogy is God and us...that if we keep asking, God will answer, and sometimes the answer is no, but God will eventually answer and give us what it is we are asking for.

Now for those who read it primarily this way, I'm going to be a little controversial and say that there's a problem with this interpretation. I want to begin by saying that I am a believer in prayer. I grew up in a Korean Christian home, prayer is no joking matter. We prayed for everything from good grades to finding a good parking space to healing for those who are sick. I do believe we should pray with conviction and belief and honesty. But there's a problem with this sole interpretation of prayer because it almost makes it sound like prayer is nothing more than a transactional act with God. In this interpretation, it feels like there is some kind of deal that happens if you pray the "right" way. That if you ask, God is going to give you what it is you want in return. I've heard the analogy that in this way, God is like a gumball machine and all we have to do is put in our quarter and then we'll get our gumball. This, friends, is where the harmful prosperity gospel stems from ... if we pray hard enough, we will get everything we want and need and that our heart desires.

Whether or not we're completely conscious of it, I think we are all taught to think like this about God and the role of prayer. And because this is what we think God is like, and that this is what prayer is, somehow a give and take transaction, I believe this is why many get frustrated with and end up walking away from their faith and doubting God.

Over 95 percent of the time that I listen to someone tell me about why they are struggling with their faith or doubting God, it's because God did not answer their prayers like God was supposed to. That somehow God allowed some horrible thing to happen and did not magically stop it. That God allowed a tragedy to happen in spite of all of the prayers for healing or wholeness. When we think of prayer as solely a transactional activity where we get whatever it is we ask for if we pray hard enough, it is no wonder we feel the real pain of unanswered prayer. And so I want to acknowledge that this is a tough scripture to interpret in that way.

But remember how I said that I noticed something I had not noticed before in this scripture?

For the first time, I noticed that there is actually only one promise in this passage about prayer. And it's not the one I was raised to expect or told about. Jesus concludes this whole teaching about prayer with this sentence: "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!" How much more will the heavenly Parent give the Holy Spirit to those who ask ... give the Holy Spirit to those who ask ... give the Holy Spirit.

Friends, what Jesus promises us in answer to our prayers is the Holy Spirit. That's it. That's all. That is the only promise that is officially made to us. There is no other promise or guarantee. And so, my question for us this morning, then, is do we consider the "yes" of God's Spirit a sufficient response when we pray? Is it enough? If God's **guaranteed** answer to our persistent and fervent prayers is God's own self, can we live with that? Is that more than enough for us?

Because what I think this passage is telling us is that if we dare to go to God boldly and with courage, if we can be persistent in our asking, our knocking, and our seeking of God, prayer can awaken the Spirit that already rests upon and is within you. Remember that Pentecost day? That Spirit fire is already upon you, upon your heart, and prayer awakens it! It comforts, guides, and shakes us to move and to act as God's hands and feet, God's body and heart and mind in this world. Prayer awakens the Spirit that already rests upon us.

And so I ask again, Church, can that be more than enough for you this day?

Maybe for some of you the answer is a resounding yes. And maybe for some of you this morning, you're not quite sure. Maybe it depends. Because honestly, when I persist in prayer to God and do not get the answers I'm looking for, it is hard to accept that the Holy Spirit is the answer and the response that I need when honestly, I would rather this country have some common sense gun control. I would rather women and those who can get pregnant to have autonomy over their bodies, and for unexamined violence against people of color to stop. When I pray for the friend whose wife is dying of cancer to be healed or a loved one who is deep in depression to find relief, those are the prayers I actually do want answered as requested, please and thank you. And I quickly find myself in the same trap theology I mentioned earlier. I realize that even with this realization and gift I know I am promised of God's own self alive within me, my love for God is actually pretty shallow. I want stuff from God much more than I actually want God. I'm still conditioned to believe that the transactional gumball machine God is the one I want—the one that can swoop in and fix everything if only I would pray and believe hard enough.

In a commentary about this passage, theologian Debie Thomas puts it this way: ***“I want God to sweep in and fix everything much more than I want God’s spirit to fill and accompany me so that I can do my part to heal the world. Resting in God’s yes requires vulnerability, patience, courage, discipline and trust—traits that I can only cultivate in prayer.”***

And so friends, maybe, just today, we start small. Maybe to begin, our prayer is the same that the disciples ask of Jesus right at the beginning. Simple and direct, “Lord, teach us.” Teach us how to receive the gift of your Spirit. Even as we pray for the wrongs of this world and the real pain of those we love, may our prayer lead us to be attune to the gift of the Spirit that is promised us. May it awaken within us so that we can do our part to heal the world ... to let our light shine ... to cultivate all of those things we need to embody the answers someone is looking for. Friends, Jesus, the Savior, he took time to pray. He did it a lot. So, we too, pray because it's what God's children do. And we pray because what we probably need most, whether or not we realize it, is God's Spirit awakening within us to do our part to heal the world. Let us persist in asking, knocking, and seeking that.

Whether it's at a youth conference with young people singing the roof off the rafters or through a simple cup of coffee on a Monday morning, may you find yourself with more than enough because our prayers ushering in God's Spirit and reminding us that we are not alone in this broken and aching world ... God's YES to us through the gift of the reminder of God with us, it really is more than enough.

Lord, teach us.

Amen.