

“The Gift of Prayer”

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

Located in central New Brunswick throughout the early 90's, Flip's Homestyle Restaurant was a prominent community feature that was loved by nearly everyone. They offered friendly service, a clean and family oriented environment, good prices, and food so wonderful that many people stopped cooking and ate 3 meals a day at this rural and unique little piece of paradise. But, much like many things, there was one catch to dining at Flip's Restaurant. Ruth, the daily cook and also the owner of the establishment, was unable to read or write. As you might imagine, this quickly created issues for understanding the order sheets that were being brought into the kitchen. A person might ask for a hamburger, and get a bacon cheese burger instead. Caesar salads often manifested as cold plates, and it wasn't unheard of to receive onion rings if you asked for French fries. Now, this might sound alarming and perhaps like a reason to never return to the restaurant, but Ruth was one of those people who it was difficult to be upset with. When called out on her mistakes, she would come to your table, smile, and remind you that in her kitchen, there was but one rule: take just one bite, and if you still are unsatisfied, she'd make you what you ordered for free.

Needless to say, there were very few orders that got sent back to the kitchen. The restaurant even went as far as submitting blank order sheets that quickly became known as “Ruth's Mystery Special.” The secret to Flip's Homestyle Restaurant was that somehow, even when a person thought they knew for certain what they wanted to eat, Ruth would often surprise them with a meal that was far better than anything they could have imagined. To this day I have no idea how she was able to do it, but those who visited Flip's on a regular basis knew that they could trust Ruth, because even though you might not get what you order, Ruth made good food that brought joy and satisfaction to the customers who were willing to trust and embrace the unique dining experience that she provided.

Flip's Homestyle Restaurant – where you don't always get what you order, but always seem to find what you need.

Prayer often feels much like Flip's Restaurant. Petitions and sometimes demands are directed toward God through prayer, but despite what might be requested of God, different results often occur. It can be so difficult when the genuine desires of the heart are lifted in prayer only to feel unanswered, misheard, or perhaps rejected. Yet, in today's text, Christ reminds listeners: “Ask, and it will be given 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” (Luke 11:9-10). This passage has troubled me for many years because there have been times when I have approached God with utmost sincerity, asking, seeking, knocking, begging and pleading, only to find that sickness was not healed, death was not prevented, and seemingly unfair circumstances happened regardless of my appeal toward the heavenly throne. I am sure that many others can relate.

It can be easy to interpret Christ's words as an equation that results in the deepest desires of our hearts – but is that really what God, through Christ, is offering?

Luke begins chapter 11 by introducing the importance of prayer and the concept of discipleship. Like

many times throughout Luke's gospel, Jesus is noted to have been praying and when he finishes, one of the disciples turns to him and asks: "Lord teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Now, it was common practice for religious leaders to teach their disciples how they themselves prayed - and so perhaps wanting to keep up with the local customs, one of the twelve is likewise requesting that Christ teach his own disciples how he prays. The example of prayer that Christ provides has become well known as The Lord's Prayer, but it is often quoted from the extended version located in the gospel according to Matthew. And so, one might wonder why in Luke's gospel Christ gives a much shorter version of that prayer. Now, it is possible that Jesus taught his disciples to pray this way on more than one occasion, but perhaps more likely is that in today's text, the prayer is shortened to provide some emphasis on the importance of five distinct petitions within the Lord's Prayer.

As we have heard, Luke's gospel reads:

Father – hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

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.

The prayer begins by highlighting a parent-child type relationship that Christ later uses to highlight God's willingness to give good things. Just as a good parent gives good gifts to their children, God who is holy and just, gives even greater gifts to God's children. But that willingness to give good gifts is somewhat predicated on the following petition: your kingdom come. The prayer begins with a recognition of the relationship between God and God's children, it pleads that God remain holy, and then acknowledges the perfectness of God's will by requesting before anything else, that God's kingdom come. And from that basis, the prayer shifts into petitions for God's assistance and help: give us our daily bread, forgive us our sins, and do not bring us to the time of trial.

Now, this fifth petition is somewhat striking, because as Martin Luther suggests in the small catechism, "God tempts no one." The issue here is mostly with the inability of the English language to fully encapsulate what the Greek text is communicating. The Greek reads: *rhuomai* us from the *ponéros*. That is: protect, comfort, or deliver us from pain, maliciousness, and trouble. And it is on that note, in which Jesus begins a discord about a neighbor meeting the need of his persistent friend, the parent who gives good gifts to their children, and contrasts both examples with God who gives the most perfect gift of all, the Holy Spirit. And so, when Jesus promises: that "everyone who asks receives, everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" it is likely that he is referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit. God isn't promising to be a genie who grants every wish and demand, instead, God is promising to be like a faithful friend, a good father, who walks with their children and seeks to bring them comfort and love as they navigate and discover both the joys and the suffering of this life.

The gospel of Christ is that like a good parent, God sends the gift of the Holy Spirit to his children if they but knock, search, or ask for it. God's promise is not that faithful Disciples of Christ will receive everything that they pray for, nor is the promise that this life will be void of suffering, pain, or trouble. Instead, God through the gift of the Holy Spirit, promises to be present, suffering, mourning, and journeying with his children as they face the unfair trials and uncertainties of this life. God's active presence amidst our suffering is what Martin Luther often referred to as the theology of the cross. Robert Kolb, an editor of The Book of Concord, notes that Luther's theology of the cross outlines that "in the shadows cast by death, God does indeed meet his straying [and] rebellious human creatures...it is there that God reveals who he is and reveals who they are. [It's] not in [a] ight beyond the clouds, but in

the dust of the grave. God has come to tell it like it is about himself and about humanity” (adapted from: *Luther on the Theology of the Cross* by Robert Kolb, 2003, parenthesis added).

A part of the theology of the cross is that God, through the Holy Spirit, is both active and present amidst the suffering of this life. The struggles of this life remain an ever-present reality, but because of God’s holy presence, there is hope, comfort, and peace.

Many within our midst are feeling the heartache and suffering that is associated with this life, but friends, we do not need to navigate the troubled journey alone. For Christ has given an open invitation for all to seek, ask, and invite God’s Holy and restorative presence into each and every circumstance. Just as the persistent friend continually asked his neighbor for help, God’s children are called to persistently bring their worries, hopes, and fears before the throne of grace. I love that Jesus uses the analogy of persistence, because for me it serves as a reminder that God never grows tired of hearing from me. Christ not only invites, but calls his disciples to be persistent in the pursuit of prayer. God wants to hear from God’s children through a relationship of prayer. And much like the friend who knocks on a neighbor’s door is embarrassed or ashamed by not having bread to share with a guest – Christ likewise is calling God’s children to be open and honest in their prayers – for God is full of grace and compassion. God is forgiving, understanding, and offers help and restoration amidst circumstances of shame.

The reality of this life is that much like at Flip’s Restaurant, we don’t always get what we hope or pray for. Prayer might not always be answered in the way that we anticipate, but rest assured, God hears every prayer, sees every tear, and love us more than the human mind can even begin to fathom. God’s holy presence waits with tender comfort, hope and peace when we but knock, seek, and ask.

God is present, God is faithful, hallowed is His name. Amen.