

Today we embark on our 2nd year of ministry together here at St. Paul’s. Just a year ago, on the first Sunday in July (as you all held your breath) we shared our first of 52 Sundays together. It is a true joy for us to be your pastoral family, and I’m under the impression that our first year together has been GOOD. As I’ve shared before, when my colleagues ask me how it’s going, I tell them that I don’t know how it could be any better!

As you heard during announcements, and given our momentum, our Church Council supported a recommendation to expand our program ministry team. I can’t tell you how excited we are to have Jenny Nesbitt come on board, joining Liz Flage and Jen Hoggan, as we strive to ensure that our ministry offerings for students of all ages -- and their families -- will be the very best they can be! As our Sunday School navigates an 8-week hiatus before relaunching in September, I sincerely invite you to be in conversation with any of us if you need ideas and tips so that your family can participate in worship during this time!

But I do need to confess; last Sunday was very hard as we bid farewell to our Praise Band Leader of 3 years. All year long, I so looked forward to 8 am on Sundays as the Praise Band would begin their rehearsals. Ever since learning that Jeana would be leaving us, Charlie and I and the Staff and our Staff/Parish Relations Committee have been praying that God will bring just the right person to fill this void. I invite you to join us in our persistent prayers.

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The invitation to persistent prayer fits with our reading from Luke 11, where we not only hear Jesus teach his disciples to pray, but also hear the Parable of the Friend at Midnight, followed by Jesus’ teaching about God’s reliability when we go to God in prayer.

This is week 4 of 7 on our worship theme *Story Formed: Parables of Grace*. Of the parable’s we’ve looked at so far, this is the one I’m least familiar with. So, how does this short story of a ‘midnight caller’ fit among the parables of grace?

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After Jesus teaches his disciples a version of what we call *The Lord’s Prayer*, Jesus says, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at

midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’”

Now, if we’re to understand the reason Jesus told this parable, we must first know that in Jesus’ time, providing hospitality (even to unexpected guests) was a key feature in Jesus’ Palestinian culture. 3 things were expected of a host whenever a guest arrived: 1) The host would greet the guest with kisses. 2) The host would wash the feet of the guest. 3.) The host would make sure that the guests were fed. (Indeed, whether the guest was hungry or not... it was also expected that the guest would eat whatever was set before them.) So, with this opening line of the parable, everyone listening to Jesus would’ve understood what was going on and just how critical it was that the host provide hospitality for this midnight guest...

But then the parable takes a twist... “And (the Neighbor) answers from within, “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I can’t get up and give you anything.” Now, we might resonate with the irritable response of the neighbor, but Jesus’ original audience would’ve been scandalized. Given the centrality of hospitality in Middle Eastern communities, no one in their right mind would say such a thing! (They might think it, but they wouldn’t say it!) So, none of Jesus’ hearers would expect a friend to say what’s said in v. 7, because a friend who refuses to help in such a situation would violate the societal expectations of hospitality and incur enduring shame. This is how important hospitality was, even under the circumstances Jesus describes in the parable.

Unless we fully comprehend that the neighbor’s response in v. 7 is too ludicrous for his audience to imagine, we will miss the most profound lesson Jesus is trying to teach his audience (and us) in this parable. Because Jesus then concludes the parable saying, even a friend who might come close to violating such a cultural convention, will finally supply whatever is needed to the one who has asked.

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Why is this important?

Because Jesus is trying to highlight a primary way God is misunderstood by the faithful both then and now. In this parable, the peeved neighbor ‘stands-in’ to illustrate the common way Jesus’ audience (and we!) approaches God in prayer. When God is conceived of as holy, unapproachable, and wrathful, we then offer timid prayers, because we don’t want to irk such a touchy and stand-offish God! Such a God might smite us if we pray wrongly!

Jesus’ parable is meant to teach us that as ludicrous as it is to imagine a neighbor who will not help his friend in need; Jesus wants us to know that this conception of God is even more ludicrous!

Now, this doesn’t mean that God is like the proverbial Genie in a bottle. But both the Lord’s Prayer that precedes the parable, and vv. 9-13 which follow the parable, make it clear that God is approachable, reliable and altogether good. And so we can approach God asking for what it is that we really need, as well as for those things that will bless the lives of others.

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As we start our 2nd year of ministry, I want to share three things I’d ask us to be praying for this year as a congregation.

First, on many Sundays, I’ve walk through the pews of our church, praying that God will fill every seat. I invite you to join me in this prayer whenever you arrive on Sundays. Look around at the unoccupied seats and pray that God will fill that seat; and perhaps, by next year, we may need to contemplate adding a third worship service!

To state the obvious, you also need to include yourself and loved ones in this prayer. Pray that God will help you overcome any barrier that might impede your being in worship on Sunday mornings. Obviously, there are Sundays where you can’t make it, but if you are here, praying for the empty seats whenever you can be here; you will be here to observe your prayers answered!

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Secondly, join in prayer that God will provide a gifted Praise Band Leader to fill our open position. I’ve heard people say – and I’ve wondered myself – if we will find someone as uniquely gifted as Jeana. I’d be lying if I said I

haven’t felt some anxiety about this. But I want you to remember that there was also some anxiety 18 months ago when Pastor Neal’s announced his retirement. People rightly wondered what type of pastor could replace Neal. And I think there were lots of misgivings about whether the Bishop and our denomination would send a ‘dud’ to take Neal’s place. (I hope most of you don’t think that’s what happened...)

One of the things Jen and I learned even before any of you knew we were coming, is that a group was meeting faithfully on Sunday mornings to pray that God would send the right pastor for St. Paul’s. I can’t overstate what an impact knowing this on both Jen and I, knowing that even before the Bishop appointed us to St. Paul’s, the process was soaked in persistent prayer.

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Third, please be praying over our Christian Education program. Even as our Sunday School takes a summer break, our hope is to launch into the Fall with a bang. It’s clear to me that our Sunday School classrooms need a major overhaul. Last year one of our youth did a terrific painting project that really made a difference, but the flooring and furnishings, and doors and windows, our technologies... these all need significant improvements if St. Paul’s will have a reputation of being the ‘go-to’ place for families with children.

Even now our staff and volunteer Sunday School superintendents are reviewing curriculums. But they are also praying that God will place a call on the hearts of many of you to serve as teachers for either the 9 am and 10:30 am worship hours, because we are going to have two different Sunday School programs in the Fall.

A year from now, I’m hoping we can say “Mission Accomplished” regarding this prayer.

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Friends, Jesus teaches us that God is approachable, reliable, and altogether good, and so can ask God for what we really need, as well as for those things that will bless the lives of others. To know that we can approach God in this way is sheer grace. Amen.