## Luke 11:1-13

**1**One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

**2**He said to them, "When you pray, say:   
   " 'Father,   
   hallowed be your name,   
   your kingdom come.   
 **3**Give us each day our daily bread.   
 **4**Forgive us our sins,   
      for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.   
   And lead us not into temptation.' "

**5**Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, **6**because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'

**7**"Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' **8**I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldnesshe will get up and give him as much as he needs.

**9**"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. **10**For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

**11**"Which of you fathers, if your son asks fora fish, will give him a snake instead? **12**Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? **13**If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

“Teach Us To Pray”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch Resistance worker during WWII whose autobiographical book, *The Hiding Place* may be familiar to many of you. In it she tells the story of her family’s work to provide shelter and eventual escape to many Jews who would otherwise have likely been imprisoned or been killed. I mention her now, though, because of a simple question I have heard that she asked. I return to it from time to time and offer it to you this morning as we consider the meaning and purpose of prayer. For now, I don’t even want to answer the question for myself or at all for you, but would leave it to you to consider, perhaps aspirationally. She asks, "Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?"Isn’t that wonderful? I invite you to think about this for just a few moments before I move to share a couple of short poems I have been reading and rereading this week as I have wondered what a prayer is—how to pray, and how to think about its effect.

“Is prayer our steering wheel or our spare tire?” Silence for a brief time

Each time I worked a bit on this morning’s sermon I discovered some new tidbit of writing about prayer that or, in my own understanding, pointing to prayer, such that I want to share them with you. I also want to say less and ask more this morning, hoping we may turn toward a longer conversation with each other and with God. That’s the way I think about prayer often—conversation with God. With this in mind, I would like to invite anyone who is interested in being part of a prayer chain to send me a note via email. Your deacons have discussed this in our last two meetings, knowing that our desire to pray for one another is strong. When I know who would like to be part of this group, we will meet to determine the way we will share our prayer requests.

In a classic work about prayer, O. Hallesby writes quite simply that “prayer has one function, and that is to answer “Yes,” when [God] knocks, to open the soul and give [God] the opportunity to bring us the answer” (*Prayer*, 155). Getting to that point of affirmation, of reception and acknowledgement is part of our spiritual path. For my part, I often am reminded of the goodness of life and of God in poetry, very simple poetry, and so will share the first and last stanzas of a poem from Eleanor Lerman called “Starfish” before then reading all of a poem by Mary Oliver of which you may only have heard a simple question. First, though, Lerman’s “Starfish” whose unnamed gratitude grounds her observations:

This is what life does. It lets you walk up to

the store to buy breakfast and the paper, on a

stiff knee. It lets you choose the way you have

your eggs, your coffee. Then it sits a fisherman

down beside you at the counter who says, Last night,

the channel was full of starfish. And you wonder,

is this a message, finally, or just another day?...

So life lets you have a sandwich, and pie for your

late night dessert. Pie for the dog, as well. And

then life sends you back to bed, to dreamland,

while outside, the starfish drift through the channel,

with smiles on their starry faces as they head

out to deep water, to the far and boundless sea.

That feels somehow like a prayer to me.

### The Summer Day, by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean-  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

Sing: “They’ll know we are Christians by our prayer, by our prayer . . .” Kate Huey, whose “weekly seeds” I have shared with you before now, suggests that when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, it was as if they were asking to be told how to be; maybe even who to be.

And who better to ask, right? Surely these good men of faith; these men of God had already been prayerful Jews. But they saw in Jesus something wholly other from anyone they had known. They saw power and relationship that they knew was different from what they had known or understood before, and so they want to be part of it. What better way to be part of what Jesus was and is than to have the same kind of relationship with God that he does. Doesn’t relationship have a lot to do with the conversations we have? Isn’t relationship reflected in the way we talk to and about each other? I wonder if that’s what they were trying to get close to when they asked to be taught how to pray.

And when Jesus taught them; what Jesus *teaches* us, is that it isn’t all about us. “*Our* father, who art in heaven.” I don’t know which word is more significant here, and I’m not going to try to figure that out right now. So, let’s talk about each one, beginning, though, with the first word. In fact, we will stay with that first word this morning, at least after I touch briefly on the second word, as it relates to the way that I have come to pray this gift of a prayer. I have added the word Mother to the prayer’s opening salutation, because of my sense of God’s overall parental, creative nature and recognizing that God’s nature is not tied to gender in the way our *language* *for* God often is. Briefly, and in a way I am happy to discuss at length another time, words are only ever symbols that point to the nature of something, and so we are limited in how we might refer to God, who is always greater than we can know. But for this morning, and only briefly so that we might carry all our musing into conversation over coffee, I would like us to consider how we might make this and all of our prayers more for and about others than only ever for and about each of us individually.

The following poem was found in a mailing from the Omaha Home for Boys:You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "I."   
You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "My."   
Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer and not pray for one another,   
And when you ask for daily bread, you must include your brother.   
For others are included ... in each and every plea,   
From the beginning to the end of it, it does not once say "Me."

We could drop this in a box labelled “cute stuff” and not think about it again, but I invite you to pray the Lord’s Prayer later this morning and consider how it is true that our private conversation with God may always be for others as well as for ourselves.

See, I really did mean to ask more questions this morning than to provide answers, hoping that together we may discover a more lasting understanding. And what does it mean to ask whether prayer is "your steering wheel or your spare tire?"Let us pray: Loving God, help us to knock vigorously on your door and be ready to open our own so that we may allow you to enter our hearts and our homes. Amen