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Luke 11:1-3
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Lord, teach us to pray – Lord, teach us to pray. This is what the disciples asked of Jesus. They had seen him praying and they were so impressed by the intimacy that he shared with God that they said *Lord, teach us to pray.* Now they might have supplied the unspoken word 'how'. They probably intended to say “Lord, teach us how to pray.” But if we came before the Lord today, instead of saying “Lord, teach us how to pray,” perhaps we should ask just “Lord, teach us to pray.” How do we learn to pray?

The other day my son, Noah, and I discovered that there was to be a baby shower in our home, so we took the only course of action available to males. We thought we would vacate the premises and we went to see the movie “Inception.” Now “Inception” is this hopelessly complicated, really good movie about dreams. I think if I see the movie three times I shall understand it. It's about dreams and it's gotten people thinking and talking about dreams. I started thinking about my dreams. I had a dream when I had been a minister for about a year. It was one of those sorts of odd dreams; it was very palpable and realistic. In this dream, Jesus is there asking me a question – in the middle of the night. And in the dream, Jesus said “What are you so busy doing that you don't have time to talk to me?” What are you so busy doing that you don't have time to talk to me? Now, if Jesus asked me that question, I've got a little better answer than you do because I do God stuff for a living. You have to go do other things. I could answer by saying “I'm working at your church. I'm doing your work for the people of God.” But Jesus' question stands. “What are you so busy doing that you don't have time to talk to me?”

I want to think about what we're busy doing. What I think we're busy doing that keeps us from connecting to God is, I think, just all the time we're yakking, we're listening, we're watching. We are wired all the time. Now I don't like the anti-technology sermons. I love technology. I'm really into technology. I've got an Ipod. I've got a Twitter account. I have a laptop computer. I have a blog. I set a world record last year for e-mails sent, and some of you read a few of them. I love technology. My daughter is in Kenya right now. If she needs to call me, she can call me from Kenya. She's in Africa. I love technology. At the same time, we are always wired. We are always connected. Something is always on.

I'm puzzled by some people I see, I just have to confess to you. I see they're driving or they're walking or they're pushing a stroller or they're on their bike. They're doing something and they're talking to somebody on the phone – all the time - and this puzzles me because I don't know that many people and I don't have that much to say.

I was in the Harris Teeter a while back. I got my basket and there was a woman coming toward me and she's talking on her phone and I'm trying to get out of her way and I just can't and she crashes into my basket – and she looked annoyed at me because I had gotten in her way at the Teeter. We're just always on. This is the new social phenomenon. You see people who are out together somewhere but they've all got their technological gadgets and they're not talking to each other. They're communicating with somebody else, and my question in all of this is, If we

are always wired, if we're always connected, how are we going to connect with God? If we can't be with each other and be present in a moment, how are we going to be connected with God?

I was getting ready to go to Brazil on our mission trip. I was going to be gone for four days and I was talking to Rebecca, my assistant, giving her all my contact information, various ways to get in touch with me, and she said "James, why don't you just take a four-day break?" And I said "I've got to be reachable." I suspect that if we said "Lord, teach us to pray," that what he would say is, he would say "You've got to be reachable." You've got to be reachable. We're so reachable that we're not reachable, if you know what I'm saying.

I think about this man in my first church that I knew – he was just the wisest person that I think I had known to that point in my life. I said, "What is your secret? You just seem so good. You seem so holy but not in a smug way. I want to be like you. What's the secret to your life?" He was a brick mason and he said, "Well, I work hard all day and then I come home and Peg and I have dinner and then I have a few chores and then I go downstairs in the basement and I pull up an empty peach crate and I park it in front of the wood stove down there, and I just think for a couple of hours." I just think for a couple of hours. God would say "You've got to be reachable." We don't day dream anymore. We've got children and grownups not daydreaming. Daydreaming must be an important part of the life of faith. We've got to be reachable.

The disciples said to Jesus *Lord, teach us to pray*. He responds in an interesting way. He teaches them The Lord's Prayer – that was good – and then he tells a little story about a friend who goes to another friend at midnight and knocks on his door, and it's interesting what he asks for. He doesn't say "I want some bread because I am hungry." He says "I want some bread because somebody else is hungry." That's a good starting point with prayer – that we get God on board with a project to help somebody else who is in need. Too often our prayers are just about us. They're so small – it's "Lord, help me." Lord, help me. Lord, help me. Maybe it's this shrinkage of prayer that causes some people not to pray anymore because they look at our prayers and they seem so perfunctory. Or we don't really pray until there's a crisis and then we send up 911 prayers and get prayer chains going because there's a crisis, but we haven't talked to God in quite some time until there's a crisis. And then some people, they don't talk to God until there's a crisis and God doesn't seem to do what they ask for in the crisis and they just say "Ahhh, ohhhh." Lord, teach us to pray. Teach us to pray. The failure of prayer – maybe we conceive a prayer as sort of like a strategic planning session with God. We get together with God and we say "What's the agenda? What are we working on? What are we trying to get done? What's in your mind and heart, oh God? OK, let's go do that."

Prayer is a strategic planning session with God. Too often we use the word "for" after the word "pray." We say "I will pray for you." What's interesting is what we pray for. A lot of times you folks ask me to pray for you or you contact the church and you want prayers for something, and we're really honored when you do this. Every time you ask me to pray for someone or something, we honor that prayer.

We have a team of people in our church – they are our prayer team – they take these and they print them and they pray them. Isn't that beautiful? In the Body of Christ there are people who will pray for others, and it's an honor to be able to so. But what's interesting to me is what

people ask for. And I would say that nine out of 10 prayer requests have to do with health, and that's interesting because we're the healthiest people who have ever lived on the face of this earth. We enjoy the best medical care of anybody in all of history on the face of this earth. Yet the first thing we think of to pray for is regarding health. There are other things that we could pray for. You could pray for holiness or perhaps there's somebody else who gets on your nerves and you could pray for them to be holy – that got a little laugh earlier today as well. You could pray to be holy or you could pray for someone else to be holy. Of course, if you're going to pray for someone else to be holy, you probably need to pray for yourself to be holy. We could pray for wisdom, and when is the last time you prayed "Lord, help me to become wise." Of course, if we pray to become wise we probably need to sit on that peach crate for a couple of hours and just do some thinking and getting ourselves in order. Or you could pray for another person to be wise. We could pray for virtue. We could pray that our lives would matter to the poor. That's different from praying for the poor. It's a good thing to pray for the poor, but what if our prayer was "Lord, help me to live a life that will matter to those who are poor."

Prayer is a strategic planning session with God. Prayer is praying for health, indeed, especially when there's someone that we love and they are hurting and they are at risk. We pray for them, of course, but we also pray for holiness. We pray for wisdom. In short, prayer could be the time that our imaginations are expanded, that our imaginations begin to imagine what God imagines. Prayer could be the time that we learn how to dream God's dreams. Prayer is the time that we dream God's dreams so that our prayer isn't just an echo of me and my small life and my wants but our minds are blown, our imaginations are stretched, and we dream the dreams that God dreams. We dream God's dreams.

Psalms 85 I think puts it so eloquently. Psalm 85 just moves me. It is an artistic wonder. This poem was written in the late Bronze Age by someone who did not have the benefit of studying Shakespeare or Yeats or any great writer. This is someone in the Bronze Age where they had such a profound transformative experience of God that they wrote this eloquent Psalm that is just matchless in its imagery and beauty. It says steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground. Righteousness will look down from the sky. It's all-encompassing. It gives life. God's dream for us is life-giving. It is vital. It is beautiful. It's what we need to survive. I love this whole idea of the kiss of righteousness and peace. Now, in some ways in our days, kisses have been demeaned, but a kiss really is the most wonderful thing, isn't it? There's no more powerful suggestion of what we hold in high regard and what our love really is about and what we're prepared to be committed to. When you put your child to bed at night, what do you do? You kiss your child good night. I saw somebody with a baby the other day in the building who bent down and kissed the child on the head.

On March 1, 1986, Lisa and I got married in this Sanctuary that is now being renovated. We came to the front of the church. We said some very important words to each other and then, what did we do? We sealed those words with a kiss – nothing tawdry about it – it's an expression of immense regard and commitment, but it's not just words, it's taking on physical manifestation – a kiss.

I talked with a man the other day and he had been with his father when his father died. I said "What was that like?" He spoke of the grief and the dying process, and he said "Right after my father breathed his last, I bent down and I kissed him." a kiss, a tender expression of what really matters to us, physical response to the deepest commitments that we harbor in our hearts. God's dream says that there will be the kiss of righteousness and peace. It's so beautiful, righteousness and peace, the deepest virtues in the heart of God, what we crave for above all else in our lives, that these two come together and they kiss.

I preached a sermon on this passage a number of years ago. I don't usually keep my old sermons – I just throw them away – but I found this one. It was in a drawer for some reason. I don't know when I preached it. I don't know if I preached it here or at another church before I came here. So if you've heard this before, forgive me. I looked at the sermon and it had a number of not-such-great points in it. But one thing I had in there I thought was pretty good. It told the story of when I was in the eighth grade. When I was in the eighth grade, I was invited to a party with a number of children that I did not know all that well. Well, I got to the party and they were really having a big time. They were playing Twister and that was great. We had Cokes and were eating and that was great. We did some other things and that was great. And then they started a game that I was unfamiliar with and had never played before, and it seemed to involve kissing. And there I was, and they had this spinner thing and it would land on a boy and then a girl, and the boy and girl would disappear into this closet, and then they would come out and they would be blushing, giggling. I was not a pious person at that time, but I believe I began to pray "Lord, don't let the arrow land on me." That worked for awhile but then God stopped answering my prayer, and it was me. And a little girl named Marcie Estes. Why is it you can't remember the name of the person you met five minutes ago and you remember the name of some girl you saw once in the eighth grade? There we are. It wouldn't be cool to say "We're not playing." You can't do that. You had to go in the closet. So we go in the closet and I'm just thinking...I had a brilliant suggestion and said, "Marcie, let's not kiss, let's just pretend," and she was very excited by this idea. In fact, she was more excited by that idea than she should have been. So we didn't kiss. We kind of waited the requisite amount of time and then we came out with a little giggle and blush. Great. The kiss that never was.

How shall I say it, the sad truth is that for many of us in our religion, it's just pretend. We go through the motions, we get up, we come to church and we sing the hymns and we listen and maybe we do a few pious things now and then. It's meal time and you say a little prayer and maybe read a little devotional book – you've got The Upper Room or something. Most days you remember to read it or you get an e-mail from James Howell and when you have time you read it. We do some little religious things. But the fact is the dreams that we dream are our dreams. They're not God's dreams. We have our dreams and we pretend to be interested in God's dreams but really we want God to piggy-back on our dreams and help us get what we want. It's pretend. We aren't really enraptured with what God is about, with what Jesus came down to earth to show us. And what happens in that is interesting. It's not that we're bad people. It's actually that we're very good people. And sometimes it's our very goodness that's a problem.

I've been reading this book about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and late in Bonhoeffer's life he said this very interesting thing. He said "Sometimes our very goodness gets in the way of our doing the will of God." Our very goodness gets in the way of us doing the will of God.

Because, you see, what happens, we look at ourselves and we think "I'm good. I'm a good person. I don't break the law. I'm a good neighbor. I recycle. I go to church. I'm a good person. I'm good. I'm honest. I don't cheat people. I'm good. I'm a good person." He said sometimes some of us are so good and so attached to our goodness that we don't know what it means to dream God's dreams. We don't know what it means to shed our goodness – I'm going to put my goodness aside because "God, I don't want my goodness. I want to know what you want me to do. I don't want to just go around being good. I want to do God's will." And what Bonhoeffer suggests is that sometimes we're keeping our hands clean. We say "My hands are clean. I am good." And he says "Sometimes if you do God's will, actually your hands get dirty if God calls you into something that's complicated and it's messy." Other people may not look at you anymore and think "Oh, he's so good or she's so good" because you're doing something that's a little bit odd, a little bit crazy because you dream God's dream and you're willing to get your hands dirty. And you realize it's not about my dreams and my being good. It's about God's dream and doing God's will. That's what I want at the end of the day but I'll never, never get a glimpse of this kiss of righteousness and peace because I'm wired all the time. Something is always on, something is always on. I've got to be reachable; I've got to be reachable. I've got to have some noise. I've got to have some racket. Could we learn just to sit down and be still? Nothing is on, nobody can reach us. Maybe we're alone, but we're not really lonely, we're enjoying the solitude and we discover that we're not really alone. We're actually with God. Jesus, the One, they said *Lord, teach us to pray* – he's there. Maybe it feels so comfortable that you actually drift off to sleep, and you begin to dream, but in your dream it's not Jesus anymore saying "What are you so busy doing?" Instead, you dream of righteousness and peace, and they kiss each other, and it's beautiful, and you're satisfied. You wonder what took you so long. How did it take me so long just to turn it off, to be unreachable? But now, oh Lord, I am reachable. I want you to reach me. I want to dream your dreams. I don't want to be good; I want to do your will – a kiss, a kiss.