

second option was to sell the building for more like 2 million dollars to a partner who will build 90 units of affordable housing as well as a low-cost preschool where the church once stood. And then the congregation would rent back some space from the preschool building in which to worship on Sundays.

The church feels they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit has guided them to the second option. The one in which they receive much, much less money. And come away with no building of their own. But a whole lot of other people get a place to live that they can actually afford. The church members believe their wills are as closely aligned to God's will as they can be in this decision. God did not give them money to just fix their building up; they did not find a way to keep the building where their children were baptized and many of them were married. Their prayers were answered differently than they expected or maybe even wanted. But the answer was clear: here is the Holy Spirit. Here is the guide you need.

Human parents always try to give their children good gifts, even though we are flawed and fallible. The parable tells us that if that's true, as we think it is, then God's intention to give us the Holy Spirit in answer to our requests is ever so much greater. Our prayers can be simple, like the one Jesus taught his disciples. And whatever we pray, we can do it often, intentionally, and meaningfully, seeking not only the answer we expect, but maybe the one we most need: God's own Spirit, given as a gift to us in return.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



July 24, 2022
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
“A Surprising Answer to Prayer”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Luke 11:1-13

We need to start at the end here. This passage is chock full of thoughts on prayer: how to do it; what to say; what God might do in response. But it's the last line that seems like the key. *God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask.* God's answer to prayer is, so often, not exactly the things we have been wishing and hoping for. But it is rather God's own presence; the holy presence of Christ with us; God's wisdom accompanying us.

The Holy Spirit as God's answer to prayer makes sense in Luke's gospel. It's often been said that the Holy Spirit is the main character in Luke's writing. She is the driving force behind the action throughout the account in Luke and Acts, which Luke also penned. From the announcement of Mary's pregnancy to the birth of the church, the Spirit leads the way. But the Spirit is not really what we expect as the answer to our prayers.

There are many ways to think about prayer and its effects. We can never fully understand the power of prayer because we are only human. But our culture makes clear that most of us pray *for* things. We expect, or at least hope, to *receive* something as the result of prayer: answers, healing, change in the world. Sometimes we do see those results. Sometimes we don't.

Even this passage seems to press the issue though. Ask, seek, knock. Be persistent. Pray in the right way and God will respond. But if that is so, then many, maybe most of us, may not be praying in the right way, or not hard enough, or not asking clearly enough. Because people I have prayed for have died. Cancer has turned up for people for whom I prayed hard that there would be none. I've prayed fervently for people who longed who longed to have children, and still they were not able to. Which leads us back to what Luke says. What our heavenly parent gives to those who ask is the Holy Spirit.

“What does that mean?” we may be wondering. “Should I be glad about that or disappointed about that?” If we are honest in the Lord's Prayer in asking for *God's Kingdom* to come and indeed for *God's will* to be done, then I think we can be glad about this. But we might have to wrestle with

1 Michelle Voss Roberts, “Luke 11:1-13, Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 310.

2 Jeff Strickler, “A Minneapolis congregation finds new life through the ancient practice of Sabbath keeping,” *Faith and Leadership*, March 22, 2016, <https://faithandleadership.com/minneapolis-congregation-finds-new-life-through-the-ancient-practice-keeping-sabbath>

3 Lewis F. Galloway, “Luke 11:1-13, Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 313.

what the purpose of prayer is. Prayer may be less about achieving *our* needs and wants, and instead, it's about turning all our desires toward God. As commentator Michelle Voss Roberts writes, "We bring our desires to God so that they will be purified and brought in line with God's wisdom and providence." She goes on to suggest that "persistence in prayer is more likely to change our prayers than to grant them."¹

There is a church in Minneapolis whose prayers were changed in this way, rather than granted in the way they'd hoped. Several years ago, Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church was nearing the end of its ministry and moving toward closing their doors.² They had two years of endowment money left, if they really scrimped. They had less than thirty people in worship. Their pastor, the Rev. Kara Root, says the congregation was way past desperate when she arrived. I suspect the church members had been praying for renewal and more members for a long time. They were praying for children to come back into their pews. I suspect they prayed that God would simply make this happen; not that *they* themselves be changed in order to achieve that renewal.

Pastor Kara invited the congregation to pray in a different way. She invited them to pray with their actual lives. To put one day of their week into the hands of God alone. On those days, they would make their life their prayer. The congregation decided to try it. They made what felt like a radical move: they canceled worship services on the second and fourth Sundays of the month. And instead, they invited everyone into a day of true rest. This is what the Bible calls Sabbath; so it's an ancient religious practice, really, even though it feels almost impossible for many of us today. Ahead of those Sabbath Sundays at Lake Nokomis, there is a gathering on Saturday night, sometimes with a meal, other times just with a simple prayer service, to invite folks into the next day's rest.

Church members observe this Sabbath day in all different ways. They have to decide for themselves, what does it truly look like to not work; to be free and to be present to yourself, to those you love, and especially to God? Some members sleep in because they so rarely get to do that. Some members wake up early and read the whole New York Times cover to cover, because they have time to do it. Some take walks and enjoy time in nature. Others stop themselves from paying bills or going shopping. And perhaps most challenging of all, some families choose not to send their kids to soccer practice or whatever other activity is scheduled for that Sunday. They refuse to let the goal of productivity rule their lives on that Sabbath day. As their church puts it, the Sabbath is "for rest and play, *being* instead of *doing*, connecting with God and others, and embracing the world with awareness and gratitude."

This congregation's prayers have been answered. Their persistence in praying for renewal in the life of their congregation was absolutely answered. The members now have a heightened awareness of being connected to God. They are spiritually aware of the deep struggle and incredible gift of entrusting their whole lives to God, demonstrated by those Sundays, a couple of times a month. The congregation has gained some new members and they have a children's program once again. But ultimately, God answered their prayer not through bunches of new members and dollars, but through the gift of the Holy Spirit. They have been renewed and they have a sense of new life because of God's presence with them. Ask, and it will be given; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. The Spirit is their constant companion as they practice Sabbath-keeping together.

Lewis Galloway writes that "the gift God gives is the gift of the divine self, the Holy Spirit. We discover through persistent prayer that prayer is not so much communication with God, but communion with God."³ Maybe on a day set aside just for that. Maybe in the moments tucked into our daily lives when we really tune in; when we really notice how God is with us, healing us, shaping us. Prayer, in the way Jesus teaches puts us in touch with God's own self. And it helps reshape *our own* desires so that they become more like *God's* desires for the world. Although this view of prayer may be both spiritual and mystical, it is not altogether impractical. It can also result in concrete activity and clear direction.

My friend Alice is the pastor of a congregation in a wealthy area of northern Virginia. The congregation is small but vibrant. Though they renovated their sanctuary just a few years ago, the rest of the building is in need of major renovation. It needs to be completely rewired and requires a new roof for starters. The church building also happens to sit on a piece of property that is worth boatloads of money. So the congregation engaged in a year and half long discernment process together about what to do with their building. That means they prayed a lot, listened to each other's ideas, and intentionally tried to align their desires with what God might want for their church and for the wider world. Their prayer has had a clear result. They realized that they want whatever they do to match their overall mission of service to the community and to the least of these.

Their prayer made their choice easier. They had been faced with two options: either sell the building to the highest bidder and walk away with something like 15 million dollars, to use to rebuild a smaller, newer building, or to serve their community in other ways. They wouldn't know what would happen to the site of their former church. We remember, there's nothing wrong with money put to use in God's service. Or the