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## Two Simple Things

A Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn

July 24, 2016: Luke 11:1-13

In the name of the triune and communal God, who is beyond us, who is with us, and who is within us.  
Amen.

First of all I have to say what a gift it is for me to be here with you about 30 seconds after my ordination as a priest. I say that and you probably think I am kidding, but your vestry literally did meet the night of my ordination to vote on whether or not to call me. And so, when I got home late in the evening after that most significant day in my life, I had an email from Tom which said that your vestry unanimously voted to call me as your Assistant Rector - which was just the best possible news a newly ordained priest could have. So, thank you so much for calling me and for your very warm welcome this past week and especially last Sunday. You have outdone yourselves to carefully shape every detail of our experience last week so that I and my husband Jeff and daughter Carly feel welcome here, and we truly do feel embraced. For that I am so grateful.

So now, to the business of preaching.

Last week Tom preached about the Martha-Mary story, and he gave us a very helpful understanding that Mary and Martha are not meant to be set up as a dichotomy where Mary is better and Martha is worse. In fact we need both Mary and Martha, prayer and action, - they are two sides of the same coin, they are like inhaling and exhaling constitute breathing. We need them both. However: this week our gospel text is leading us into a deep dive into prayer. Fair warning, there's not going to be a lot of Martha in this sermon. This text invites us to return to basics about prayer – to go back to the beginning, which is simple, but not easy. So, let me begin by asking you a question, and then I'd like to invite us to hold silence for a few collective seconds for you all to think about my question. And before I ask it I should just say that this is a shame-free zone – just be honest with yourself about your answers to this question. When and how do you pray?

I am guessing that there is a wide range of collective responses to that question. The most obvious answer is that we pray here at St Stephens on Sunday mornings. We are people of common prayer, we Episcopalians. But what about the rest of the week? Perhaps there are some of you who sort of uncomfortably feel like you ought to pray more, but you don't really get much out of it if you're honest.

Perhaps there are some of you who do pray, regularly, like my friend Valerie who has what seems like a constant dialogue with God in her head. But I am guessing there might also be some of you who don't really resonate with the word prayer at all, if we are honest. I myself left the Christian tradition for the better part of twenty years, and during those years I was attracted to words and practices like meditation, and reflection, and contemplation—but the word prayer sounded unsatisfying and religious and frankly too small for what it was that I wanted to do. And, some of us just pray when we are desperate: when things get really bad.

When I was a child about eleven years old I was in a Christian tradition different from this one, and in that tradition the pastor used to call all the kids up during the service for a children's sermon time. We would sit on the steps leading up to the chancel (we didn't call it a chancel but that's what it was), the pastor would give a brief story or something, and then he would ask us questions and we would answer them. I remember one day he asked us if God had ever answered our prayers. I raised my hand and told him, and the entire church, that I had prayed that my Mom would have another baby, and she did! And I told my friend Michelle about it, and she prayed that her Mom would have another baby, and her mom had two more babies! And I just could not understand why all the grownups in the church laughed at my very earnest response to the pastor's question.

As a child I thought of prayer as simply asking God for things, not unlike making a Christmas list for Santa Claus. When I grew up that model didn't seem right, especially since it seems very obvious God is not like a slot machine you can put a coin in and get what you want. So what is prayer?

In today's text, Jesus' disciples observe Jesus praying, they ask him to teach them how to pray. In fact, in Luke's gospel, prayer is mentioned more than in any other gospel, and Jesus prays in more situations in Luke than in any other gospel. When his disciples ask him to teach them about prayer, what he answers them is so beautiful. He gives them a very simple prayer – what we now call the Lord's prayer – and then he tells stories about why they should pray. I don't think when Jesus responded he meant to give them a technical manual for prayer. The actual prayer he gave them was very simple – it was about letting God be God and asking for a few simple things: daily necessities, the capacity to forgive and be forgiven, and protection. What he said next is what caught my attention. He didn't go into a how-to manual. Instead, he emphasized the kind of God to whom we are praying. He told a parable about the person who gets up in the middle of the night to ask a friend for help with hospitality. In the parable, Jesus says that even if the person won't help out of friendship, you know he will get up because of his persistence. Now, I think this particular parable loses a lot in the translation because our culture is very different today than in Jesus' time. I'll be honest with you—in today's culture if someone wakes me up in the middle of the night to raid my refrigerator, I might be a bit irritated. But in Jesus' time, it would have been absolutely unthinkable for someone to refuse to help to provide hospitality to a guest. Jesus isn't saying God is someone who needs to be nagged. Jesus is saying that whatever generosity we can count on for sure in each other is a pale distant shadow of the far greater generosity and love God has for us when we pray, and so we really ought to pray – not to pray correctly, or to cross an item off a to-do list, or to create a sort of religious Christmas list we

want God to satisfy for us – but to acknowledge real need before an overwhelmingly loving and generous God.

I think Jesus' teaching about prayer here can be distilled into something very simple. Jesus is saying that if we will just recognize two things: (1) our own need, and (2) the overwhelming love of God, we will be able to pray. So prayer, for Luke's Jesus, is based in recognizing who we are and who God is, and that is enough.

And that is also the conundrum. I don't know about you, but nothing in our culture teaches us to recognize ourselves as vulnerable and having needs. We are taught to be independent and resourceful and to problem-solve. God helps those who help themselves, right? Whether the problems you are facing are personal or social, we generally face those problems by trying to fix it, and that has an important place in the scheme of things. We all have a lot of opinions about how "they" in Washington or on Wall Street or on Main Street or in the inner city ought to solve their problems. We have opinions about how the police ought to act or what protesters ought to do or what immigrants should be allowed to do or not do. But I wonder how often we allow ourselves to recognize the depth of our connection to everyone else – how we ourselves are implicated in the systemic issues that plague our nation? Can we recognize the limits of our own capacities to fix things, and from that place of need address our concerns to a God who yearns to be known, who is already overflowing with concern and love and generosity toward us?

And can we trust the overwhelming love of God? That might be an even harder question than recognizing our own limits and needs. Some of us have suffered losses that are manifestly unfair. We have lost children, or had to sacrifice years of our lives to care for a sick relative. Some of us were raised with an image of God that sounded more punitive and demanding than loving. Whole groups of people in history have done terrible things to each other in the name of God. God-talk is all over the place, including in our political discourse, and much of it is unhelpful.

And yet, in the midst of all that, comes the invitation of Christ. Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened for you. Throughout scripture, again and again, God encounters those who are humble enough to just admit where they have reached the end of their own resources, and provides far above and beyond anything they could ask or imagine. God reaches out to barren Abram and Sarai and makes them a great nation in their old age. God hears the suffering of enslaved Israel and liberates them from bondage in Egypt. God is endlessly reaching out, to people who are utterly insignificant and who have faced the truth of their own limits, in order to create life and hope and healing in and through them.

There was a time in my own life that I had experienced quite a few miscarriages. Carly was very young and I was struggling as a mother, and still grieving from the losses. I did not consider myself a Christian at the time but for some reason I decided I wanted to find some protestant church where I could take the eucharist. My plan was to go to church, shut my ears at the sermon and the words, get a little comfort from communion, and leave. Someday I will tell you all this story in more detail, but essentially, when I got to church, I found myself formulating a simple prayer for help. What I experienced was far beyond anything I

would have imagined. Since that time I have been caught up into the current of something much larger than myself. I was able to recognize my own need and formulate the smallest prayer for help to God, and I was answered.

I hope it's OK with you that I share that personal a story this early in my time here. I know all of us come from a very wide variety of backgrounds, and that you yourselves are in all kinds of different conditions. In a room with this many people in it, I suspect that there are at least one or two of you who are struggling as much or more than I was those years ago. But many of you are not in that place. Regardless of what you are experiencing right now, I invite you to consider this moment your opportunity to cease, temporarily, your problem-solving, and to cease your planning and your to-do list. Instead, I invite you to consider Jesus' simple invitation to us to pray—to pray by recognizing our own limits, and from that place to express our needs to a God who is extravagantly ready to lead us into life.

Because I hope you notice what this text tells us Jesus actually gives those who ask, and seek, and knock. Jesus says that God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. I'm guessing most of us are not asking for the Holy Spirit when we pray. But this is what God gives – the Spirit, the Spirit in Luke's gospel who anoints Jesus to be good news to the poor, the Spirit who is granted the disciples at Pentecost in an immense release of love, joy and hope into the world. When we pray, God grants us the same Spirit who hovered over the deep in the act of creation, the Spirit who is always and endlessly making new life out of death, and barrenness, and loss.

This week I would invite you to take a little bit of time off from the usual treadmill of production and planning and worry and problem-solving, and to face honestly where you personally and we collectively are at the end of our resources. As some of us watch the Convention this week, as we face the news and whatever will be in it, as we go about our daily lives of work and family and home, I invite you to breathe, and consider formulating a simple prayer to God about whatever it is that you are encountering. Then notice where and when you sense the small shifts in your consciousness or in the world that indicate God's Spirit is present and bringing about healing and transformation and life. Notice how God's Spirit is inviting change in you in order to facilitate that life. For to pray, all we need is honesty about our limits, and a mustard seed of trust in the overwhelming love and generosity of God.