



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

FEBRUARY 28, 2016  
THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

## Leaning into the Heart of the Holy: Learning Prayer Luke 11:1-17; Acts 10:1-48

While I was at my home church last week, I had a chance to visit briefly with my high school English teacher. I have often credited her with helping me get to where I am for she taught me a great deal about our beloved language, its literature, and its expression. She taught me how to read and research and write.

She also introduced me and my classmates to creative writing and the power of words to paint pictures, evoke feelings, and stir up thoughts. I learned from her that words can be clever, powerful tools.

For instance, grammar lessons taught us the different parts of speech. We learned that, at a minimum, every sentence must have a subject and a verb. For information and interest, you can add additional nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and various phrases. To make people think, you can employ a word with multiple meanings so that they have to pause and choose which one they will use. You can also choose a word with more than one function, for instance, a word that can serve as a verb or an adjective. I thought about that possibility when I thought of prayer as one of the ways we lean into the Holy. I thought of the disciples who asked Jesus to teach them to pray and I thought of the prayer Jesus taught them in order that they might learn prayer.

“Learning prayer” can take us on two different journeys which might parallel one another or eventually converge. If we want to learn how to pray so that “learning” is a verb, we might spend our time focusing on choosing the right time and place, a good posture, a helpful formula, and the best words to convey our hearts to God. On the other hand, our purpose in prayer is often for our communion with God to effect the way we live in the world, the way we do things on earth as they are done in heaven. In that case, we might choose “learning” to be an adjective, a description of the prayer that marks our lives. Learning prayer like worshipful prayer, rejoicing prayer, penitential prayer, or asking prayer is prayer with a particular purpose. Learning prayer seeks to understand more about our world and God’s presence in it so that we might

live in the world as God does. Learning prayer is prayer that changes us and, hopefully, the world.

Earlier we heard Luke's story of Jesus' disciples asking him to teach them to pray. They often saw Jesus praying and could tell that it was a meaningful and powerful experience for him. Jesus offered them what we know as The Lord's Prayer. It was a prayer they could learn and recite, even as we have done. It was also a prayer which could also cause them to think about their faith and where their prayers were leading them.

The Lord's Prayer is what I would call "learning prayer." By that I mean that in the experience of praying that prayer, we run the risk or possibility of learning something very important about our faith. We begin by reverencing the very character of God: "hallowed be thy name." For Hebrews, someone's name held their character, so, as we pray, we acknowledge the holiness of God. We pray that God's reign will become evident where we are—"thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth." In praying that prayer, we acknowledge that our work is also to make the space we inhabit on earth as much like heaven as possible. That task requires that we think about how God might handle the opportunities that come to us each day. As we pray we acknowledge our dependence on God for we ask for bread enough for the day—no more, no less. We recall that when the Hebrew people wandered in the desert, God provided them with manna every morning so that everyone had just enough, no less and no more, just what was sufficient for each day. We ask forgiveness for ourselves with the caveat that it is related to our willingness to forgive others who have wronged us. And we pray for grace to withstand times of trial, knowing that they will surely come. The Lord's prayer is "learning prayer." It is a particular prayer that we pray which, in the praying, opens our lives to important truths about God and ourselves.

Throughout this Lenten season, our desire is to learn from God, about God, and about ourselves. Learning prayer opens our minds and hearts to God and one another. It is a good way to lean into the heart of the Holy.

Two men from vastly different backgrounds, thirty miles apart, each leaned into the heart of the holy as they prayed. One, a Roman centurion named Cornelius, and the other, a disciple of Christ named Peter, were each praying to God, unaware of the impact their prayers were about to make. Listen:

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." Acts 10:1-20

We do not know anything about Cornelius' prayers. He may have prayed the psalms or other prayers he had learned. He may have poured out his heart day by day as we do, letting God know every detail of his life. What we do know is that Cornelius was faithful and prayed seeking guidance from God.

Neither do we know anything about Peter's prayer other than the fact that he was hungry when he went up on the roof to pray. And we know that God chose to use Peter's prayer and his hunger as a teachable moment.

Peter saw a vision of a sheet lowered from heaven containing animals of all kinds and God, the heavenly host, invited the hungry apostle to eat. Although he was hungry, Peter protested because some of those animals were considered unclean according to Mosaic law. As an observant Jew, he politely declined.

We know from other accounts in the Gospels that Peter could be rather stubborn at times, so it took three experiences of this vision before the lightbulb finally went off for Peter. Peter was an observant Jew and sought to follow the guidance of his faith so he limited his diet to foods that he believed were approved in scripture. Also like many Jewish Christians, Peter felt that it was imperative for a Gentile believer to become a Jew first and then a Christian. Otherwise, it was unlawful, according to the law handed down from Moses, for a Jew to associate with a Gentile.

God surprised Peter, however, and in this vision during prayer, reminded him that it was God who created each and every one of those animals; therefore, none of them were unclean or profane. Even then Peter was not certain what the vision meant.

About that time, the messengers arrived whom the Gentile Cornelius had sent, and the pieces of the puzzle began to fit into place. The next day, Peter traveled up the Mediterranean coast to Joppa and Cornelius' home. There he shared with the puzzled Roman and his family and friends the vision he had seen and why he had come. Listen again:

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised

him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. Acts 10:34-48

What began for Peter as a teachable moment—realizing that just as God had created all of the creatures of the earth so that none were to be considered “unclean” or “profane”—became marching orders for the fledgling Christian Church. As Jesus had instructed his disciples, the Gospel was to be spread throughout the world and shared with all people regardless of ethnicity. That vision became all the more important later on when the Apostle Paul accepted his call to share the Gospel with the Gentiles and Peter accepted his calling to share the Gospel among the Jews. We would likely not be here today had Peter not opened his heart and mind to the Gentiles and instead kept the Good News for the Jews alone. Instead, through prayer, God taught Peter an important fact about life—and the world changed as a result.

When we pray for understanding, for guidance, and for a way forward, God uses our prayer as a teachable moment. We may not have a vision as did Peter, but bit by bit, our understanding grows and our minds and hearts change.

That simple affirmation of faith that came to Peter as a vision during prayer is one with which we all agree: God created the world and all that is in it and declared it to be good. Yet, how many things or people in God’s good world do we condemn as unclean, profane, or evil? Two thousand years after this revelation was made to Peter, we still label people as acceptable or

unacceptable by race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, politics, and dozens of other categories which separate us. We have to remember, however, that had we lived in post-resurrection Israel, we would have been in the camp with Cornelius, not Peter. We are Gentiles, not children of Abraham. When we consider someone else unworthy of God's love, we must remember that our ancestors were once considered unworthy as well.

Thanks be to God for prayer and visions and open hearts and minds! Because of the faith of Peter and Cornelius, because of their commitment to prayer and seeking the heart of God, they learned that God created us all and claims us all as his own. Through learning prayer, they realized that Jesus lived and died and rose again to life for us all. Through learning prayer, they came to understand that they were called to live the Gospel with all people. In the contentious atmosphere in which we live today, seeking God's heart through prayer may be the only way we can learn how to live the Gospel day by day.

Learning Prayer is far more than a descriptive way of praying. It is a way of living prayerfully in the world. As we lean into the heart of the Holy, may learning prayer be our practice so that we, too, may allow the Gospel to be alive in us. Let us pray:

Lord of life, live through me. Keep my soul in harmony so sweet and pure, good and true that through my living I'll honor you. Come to me and still my will until my deeds are yours alone. Live through me, Lord of life; make my heart your own.<sup>1</sup> Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup>Deborah Dresie, "Prayer of Consecration," © Copyright 1997 by Beckenhorst Press, Inc.

February 28, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Even as we gather in your name to worship and call on your name in prayer, Holy God, we confess that sometimes we are more like those demanding signs and testing you rather than people of faith who ask and seek with open and humble hearts. But still you promise that you will be with us and that you will provide for us like a loving parent who offers good gifts to your children. We come now with hearts ready to be filled and transformed by the gift of your Holy Spirit.

We are humbled, O God, that You call us into relationship with you, inviting us into a conversation of faith and responding to our needs. We are grateful for the gift of prayer: for prayers of praise and thanksgiving in moments of pure joy, for prayers of confession when we allow ourselves to admit our need for your grace, for prayers of supplication in times of need, for a whispered question or cry of despair when we have nowhere else to turn, for every circumstance which brings your name to our lips and your abiding presence to our awareness. O God, we know that we can bring to you the deepest longings of our hearts with the assurance that you hear and respond when your children call.

We are grateful, too, Loving God, that we can pray for the sake of others. We pray for healing for those who are sick, for comfort for those who mourn, for compassion for those who suffer, for peace for those who endure violence. May our prayers change not only their circumstance but also transform our hearts. May our prayers uttered on behalf of others move us to respond to their needs with generosity and to accept them with openness. May our prayers draw us closer together as a community of faith, seeking to discern your will and to answer your call. Hear our prayers, Gracious God, for we offer them in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus the Christ, and by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
Associate Minister