

“Teach us to Pray”

Luke 11:1-13

Rev. Alida Ward

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So, is there anyone in this room who hasn't yet heard of Jeremy Lin? Just in case you haven't, here's what you need to know in a nutshell. At Palo Alto high school in 2006, the six foot son of Taiwanese immigrants leads his school basketball team to the state championship. The kid is amazing, dazzling on the court. Some Division One school must want him for their team, right? No one recruits him. Is it 'cause he doesn't look like any basketball star has looked? Maybe. Bright enough to go anywhere, Jeremy heads to Harvard, which is happy to have him on the team. At every game, opposing fans and even players are mercilessly cruel with taunts. “Orchestra practice is on the other side of campus” he hears. He leads Harvard to victory after victory, scores 30 points against UConn. All-Ivy League first team over and over. Some NBA team must want him, right? Nah. No one drafts him when he graduates in May 2010. Eventually he ends up being assigned to the NBA's D league – Development League. Pretty much the basement. The Knicks pick him up at the end of December, 2011, to be their fourth-string point guard. And maybe you know the story from here. On February 4, a month ago, fourth-string Jeremy Lin gets put in the game. Scores 25 points. Ends the Knicks' losing streak. And then he does it again and again.

On February 10, 48 hours before our mission team flew to India, I and a whole heck of a lot of people glued to our TVs watched Jeremy Lin lead the Knicks to victory over the Lakers, and I have to tell you, to watch someone play with that much exuberance and delight – not to mention brilliance – was just a joy. It was a joy. 38 points he scored that night.

Why on earth am I starting a sermon about Prayer with a story about Jeremy Lin? 'Cause what you might not know is this is a young man of deep faith. He doesn't Tebow after a three-point shot, and he doesn't cross himself before a free throw, but his faith is just as much a part of his game – his faith runs deep and real. At every youth group meeting this past week, I've had them watch an interview with Jeremy Lin, And this is what he says: *I pray before my games, I pray after, I pray during. That's a have-to for me. God helps me with everything, throughout the day. So just to be sure that my heart and my mind are on the right things, and that I trust in God and depend on him alone. I pray a lot, because if I don't, then I won't be able to do it.*

I like for our kids to see a great athlete sink a three-pointer. But I like even more for them to hear a great athlete unafraid to talk about how to pray.

The scripture story that Jon read to you is all about how to pray, when to pray. Jesus, it says, is off by himself praying, which he did an awful lot. And his friends, his disciples, they figure, well, if he's doing it, guess it's something that we ought to be doing too, but we're not really sure how. So they ask him – Lord, teach us to pray, they say. And he says, *okay, well, here's a little prayer you could start with. Our Father in heaven, he says, your name is holy. May your kingdom come and may your will be done.* And you

pretty much know how the rest of his little prayer goes, because it's the Lord's prayer, and every Christian has been praying it every day since that moment Jesus taught it to his friends. Forgive us, it says, and we know we need to forgive us others. Feed us each day with what we need – what our bodies hunger for, what our spirits hunger for. And help us choose the good, not the evil.

But it doesn't stop there. Jesus really wasn't just saying, okay, here's a five-line prayer that I want you to memorize, and you're good to go. As Fred Zarrilli said at our Wednesday night program on the Lord's Prayer, *Jesus used to go off and pray for hours – I kind of doubt he was just reciting the Lord's Prayer over and over*. No, Jesus was saying *here's a jumping off point. Here's a good way to get started*. But prayer, real prayer, is an ongoing conversation, something you do constantly, constantly, persistently. That's why the next thing Jesus says to the disciples, after the Lord's Prayer, is a little story. Kind of a strange story, but he gets his point across. Think of it this way, he said to his friends, it's like you're home one night and someone shows up unexpectedly for dinner, and you're out of bread. But you know your neighbor has bread, so you go and bang on your neighbor's door. And you just keep banging on the door until eventually he opens up and gives you the bread. He gives you all the bread you need. Prayer's like that, he said. Keep knocking. Keep knocking on the door, and it will open for you. You keep at it, Jesus was saying. You just keep at it all the time.

That's pretty much what Jeremy Lin was saying. I pray before the game. I pray after the game. And I pray during the game too. Wednesday night, when we were all talking about prayer, one person among us said, I pray as soon as I wake up. I think about everything that lies before me, and I pray I'll do all right with it, I'll be who God wants me to be. And another church friend said, I pray at night. I look over everything I've done that day, and I think about what I could have done differently, and what I need help with tomorrow. Pray in the morning, pray at night. Keep knocking on the door, said Jesus. Keep on knocking all day long.

I once asked a Muslim friend of mine what she most loved about her faith. The praying, she said. I love that five times a day, no matter where you are, no matter what you're doing, you stop what you're doing, you pause, and you kneel before your God, and you pray. And then you go on with your day, but then just a little while later, you stop again and you pray. I love that, she said – it makes me feel like I'm always connected to God.

That's right. That's what prayer does. Prayer is our way of connecting with the God who created this wonderful but unfinished world, the God who is constantly, daily, at work in this world for good. In October, I heard Paul Young speak, the author of the bestseller 'The Shack,' and he said this – *I believe, he said, in a God who is good all the time and involved in the details of our lives*. Yes, that is our God, and that is who prayer connects us to – the God of all goodness whose will and hope for this world is all good. Prayer opens us up to God, prayer is connection, honest conversation with God, the kind of conversation that we can't have with anyone else but God. God, this is what I'm hoping for, God this is what I don't like in myself, God, this is the fear I need to tell you because I can't tell anyone else, God this is what I long for.

Keep on knocking, Jesus said. Keep on asking.

But what if what you long for doesn't come about? What if when you knock it it feels like the door stays closed?

When the author Kate Braestrup visited with us last October, her sermon was on prayer. Her title was *does prayer work?* And it was a hard sermon to listen to, because she told us, in stark and agonizing detail, of the birth and death of her infant grandson, whose life on this earth was brief, and for whom Kate and all her family had prayed, storming the gates of heaven with their anguished entreaties. To listen to her tell this story was painful for all of us who were here that morning. Even more painful was then to hear her say, to hear her whisper – So does prayer work? **no**

But then she said this, in that same quiet whisper: *and oh yes. Does prayer work? oh yes. Where was God when I prayed for God?* she said. *God was everywhere. God was all around him and beyond him. God was the tenderness in the hands of the doctors, God was the tears in the eyes of the nurse, God was in my daughter-in-law's strength as she sang to her son and God was the song she sang.*ⁱ

What do you get when you pray? Well - you get God. God's own presence is the answer to every prayer, and the answer that is greater anything we could ask for.ⁱⁱ What do you get when you pray? You get God. You see God, as Kate Braestrup saw him everywhere. You know the presence of the One whose only wish for us is goodness, whose very being is Love. When we pray, we connect ourselves to the God whose only will for us is good.

When we were in India, we were with so many people whose lives are lived in the presence of God, whose lives are lived prayerfully and powerfully and lovingly. In a tiny rural village named Bornakal, we met a woman who, with her brother, cares for those whom no one else will care for, the elderly poor whose families have abandoned them, who without her would beg by the side of the road. Sister Chenamma is her name, and she was once the principal of a huge school in the big city. *I was so full of pride, she said, I thought only of how important I was. I no longer prayed, because who was I to need God?*

Then one day she fell gravely ill. And I don't know how to explain what happened, but she was amazingly healed one day. *She knows how to explain it – it was prayer, she said, she prayed and she was healed, she said. But more than that, in her praying, her desperate pounding on the door, she remembered who she was, whose she was – in her prayer, she found herself connected again to the God she'd ignored.*

And when she was well she left the big city, she left the big job, and she came to this place that is a dust speck on the map of India, and began to take in the hurting and the helpless, to feed them and shelter them. Now she is the presence of God to others. Now she is herself the answer to prayer.

Lord, teach us to pray, the disciples said. Okay, said Jesus, here's what you do. Just start. Just start talking to the one whose name is holy, who gives our daily bread. Just start talking to the one whose will is good, whose name is Love. Just start talking, start knocking on that door.

It's a *have-to* for me, said Jeremy Lin, it's what I have to do. So it was for Jesus himself. So it is for each one of us. Amen.

ⁱ Kate Braestrup, at Greenfield Hill Church, October 24 2011

ⁱⁱ inspired by Jana Childers' sermon to the Institute on Youth Ministry at Princeton Seminary