

Luke 11:1-13

When Jesus instructs his disciples on how to pray, and gives them the Lord's Prayer, a lot of what he's doing is helping them to have a particular sense of who God is. He's not saying, "Here are techniques for guaranteed results." He's saying, when you pray, here's who you're paying attention to. And that's super-important, maybe more important than anything else about prayer.

In books like Numbers, where the narrator is concerned to show both that God gave the land of Canaan to Israel *and* that the fact that there were problems were the people's fault and not God's fault, God gets portrayed as sort of a harsh militaristic judge. When the people complain about not having food in the wilderness, God sends down poisonous snakes to bite them. But then God also supplies Moses with a remedy, so you might end up wondering what the point of the poisonous snakes was. I think the point was to show that people deserve to die for their obstreperousness but God is too merciful to let that be the last word. It's awkward, though, when the same God has to do both things, the snakes and the remedy.

It made me think of the Iliad, which I re-read a couple of months ago to see if I'd get anything else out of it after forty years. (By the way, I was also thinking of the Iliad because there's a catastrophic heat wave in Europe, and classics Twitter is making its special contributions to coping with the heat by posting downloadable patterns for making your own Trojan War playset.ⁱ

Build Homer's Skaian Gates of Troy, complete with viewing platforms; the Greek camp, including ditch and drawbridge-gate; Achilles' hut, where he spends most of the Iliad stewing in his anger, including furniture and accessories; and, from **elsewhere** in the Trojan War story, [the fabled Horse,] the ultimate downfall of Troy. 53 cut-out characters are also included: the Iliad's Gods, Greeks, Trojans, and the Women that support them and suffer at their hands, as well as some more generic warriors and women to add to your reenactment of The Iliad.

The Tweeter advises that you drape a wet towel around your shoulders while enjoying this project, with the fond idea that replaying the Iliad will take anybody's mind off their misery.)

Anyway, what I got out of the Iliad reading it more recently was how absolutely amoral and unheroic the gods were. They seemed to have nothing better to do than lounge around Mt. Olympus and watch the Trojan War, occasionally interfering and, in the case of Aphrodite, getting wounded and scuttling back to Mt. Olympus whining about how much it hurt. It's clear that you worship those gods solely to get their favor for a particular project you have in mind. They really don't care otherwise, and they don't even care how you feel about them. "Worship" is making an offering, it's not having any particular attitude toward them or relationship with them.

One of the great, unique innovations of Israelite faith was to conceive of God as inherently good, inherently tied to morals and ethics. For all the Ancient Near Eastern warrior-god trappings, and all the gulp-inducing savagery in parts of the Hebrew Bible, you can see that narrators never see God as transactional. They always attempt to demonstrate some kind of moral dimension to the acts of God they're reporting, even if the morality seems to us to have big giant holes in it. Even in the case of the snakes, the remedy is not to bribe God with juicy offerings; the remedy is for Moses to make a bronze snake so people can look at it and be healed by sympathetic magic. God's not grifting here.

So in Luke's gospel, when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, he starts them off by envisioning God as head of the family: Our Father/Mother. And then they're supposed to ask for God's kingdom to come, which implies that the state of things as they are is not entirely God's will. This is *not* the kingdom, not yet. They ask for bread, to keep them alive for another

day, and for forgiveness, which is tied to their own willingness to forgive. And they ask not to be put to the test.

But Jesus isn't done. He wants to teach the disciples the attitude with which to approach God. Think of God as your neighbor, whom you might inconvenience with an urgent request. Even if the neighbor is resistant at first, he or she *will* get up and help you, you know that. That's why you persist in knocking and throwing pebbles at the window. Or even better, think of God as your father or mother, responding to a child's request for food. A normal parent would never give their child a scorpion when the child needed bread, and God won't do that either.

This is not a fail-safe formula for getting whatever you want, like the one weird trick that melts off belly fat. We know that, because we've all tried it. Jesus says, "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." But we've all prayed desperately for someone to get well or for the war in Ukraine to end or for Joe Manchin to get a clue, and it hasn't happened. Jesus is not handing us a formula or a magic trick. He's trying to get us to internalize a sense of who it is we're praying to, so that whatever happens, we have that unshakeable connection. Because stuff happens, and it's complicated, and the only promise is that God is with us, not that God will make it all go away. Jesus is trying to teach his disciples how to see and feel the connection that will sustain them through whatever happens.

An Episcopal priest named Patti Davis tells a story about visiting a nursing home, with the stipulation that if she had her way, if God answered her prayers the way she wanted, nobody would be in a nursing home, or at least if they were, they'd be cared for tenderly and

attentively, and they'd never be lonely or scared. But she doesn't have her way, and that's how the world is, God's kingdom not here in its fullness. BUT one day she was at the nursing home as it was, and a woman named Connie came to do drumming with the residents. She brought all kinds of drums, and when she had distributed them to the residents,

Connie sat down with her own drum and began to teach us what she knew. "It's easy," she said. "Let's start with the sound of your own heart: lub, dub, lub, dub." This is music we all know and so it was easy, and everyone found they could make that sound with their drum. "Now," she said, "while you play I'll add a note. But you must be sure to hold the beat, because we'll come back to it again and again." And the people played their heartbeats and she added a beat here and there and soon this incredible deep bass throbbing filled the place and we were drumming! And the amazing thing was that it was all perfect!

. . .

She taught us so much. She taught us how to make the sound of the wind in the trees by running our flat hands around the face of the drum. She taught us how to make the sound of the rain with our fluttering fingertips. . . .

And a woman with Alzheimer's, who sits most of her days in her room in silence, was shaking her maraca in time and grinning from ear to ear. And people with strokes were dancing in their wheelchairs and drumming out the rhythm and smiling for the pure joy of it. And even the deaf could hear this sound and it was a wonder. And the throbbing drumbeats filled the building and staff members wandered in and couldn't help themselves—the activities director danced with the maintenance man, and the head of housekeeping took the center of the circle to pound out a dance with a head nurse. And a man blind in one eye, who normally shuffles down the hall, took to the floor and gyrated in reckless abandon, and there was music and it was heavenly!ⁱⁱ

It was heavenly. This was a foretaste of the kingdom—not a dream of magic in which everything is perfect and nobody suffers, but a reality in which our shortcomings and frailties are incorporated into joy. Jesus didn't come as the Wizard of Oz; he came as a fallible human being, and if that's disappointing, you're missing the sublime holiness that is inherent in human art, human connection, human willingness to get up in the middle of the night and fetch bread for a neighbor.

Jesus teaches us to pray, and it's not really so that we'll always get what we want or even need, at least as we understand things. It's so we'll know God better. It keeps us from getting reductionistic, thinking, Oh, God already knows what I'm thinking so why take the time? People end phone conversations often by saying, "Love you," and presumably the person on the other end of the line already knows that, so why do they say it? Because the reminder makes it fresh again. That's why we pray too, and why we pray saying "Our Father/Mother," and ask for God's kingdom to come—not because God may have forgotten, or doesn't care, but because we want to keep our awareness of the connection fresh.

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, more willing to come among us than we are to receive you, forgive us for vision which is narrow and uninspired. Forgive us for hope which is small and uncertain. Forgive us for trust which wavers and is so often placed anywhere but in you. Grant us vision which is open to all the surprising ways you choose to make yourself known. Grant us hope that is joyous and sure. Grant us trust in you, especially when our fears threaten to overtake us. And because we know ourselves blessed by the miracle of your Spirit among us, give us grace and courage to share it with those who still walk in deep darkness. For you are the source of light and life, the One whose heartbeat created, redeemed and sustains us even now. We ask it in your Holy Name and for your love's sake. Amen.

ⁱ <https://greekmythcomix.gumroad.com/l/twplayset>

ⁱⁱ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002640/salvation_in_a_heartbeat