

Prayer power: Luke 11:1-13

by [Joy Douglas Strome](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

It is hard for average people to muster the kind of confidence that Jesus expresses in his three-part lesson on prayer. *Your kingdom come*: The kingdom seems light years away. *Give us each day our daily bread*: People die of hunger all the time, even in affluent countries. *Forgive us our sins*: Forgiveness is the exception, certainly not the rule. *Do not bring us to the time of trial*: The trials that many people endure are so horrific they cannot be detailed in print. The petitions in the prayer, when we are reading them and not saying them, lie cold and flat on the page.

So we come to what appears to be a Prayer for Dummies class in a skeptical and suspicious frame of mind. In Chicago the dropout rate for high school students is 46 percent—even higher for youth of color and for boys. In other words, in a school district that serves hundreds of thousands of students, nearly half of the high school students don't make it. So when Jesus talks about sharing bread with a neighbor in the middle of the night because it's the neighborly thing to do, or compares the love of God to the love of a parent who always does right by his or her children, I'm wondering how that sits in the minds of one of those dropouts. There are parents out there who very well might serve their child a scorpion, and there are children out there who have no contact with protective and well-meaning parents. There are householders who would never open their door in the middle of the night for fear of their life. The deadbolts clang shut, the peephole is covered and the city sleeps locked away in isolation and fear, at least in some neighborhoods. How does one pray in this context?

Luke moves from lessons on love of neighbor and love of God to the prayer life of a disciple. The disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, and he responds, as we might expect, with something more than a how-to list. He offers the skeleton of the Lord's Prayer, then two examples. In prayer we must be as persistent as the one who goes for help in the middle of the night. We must ask for a response and expect that God will respond in a way above and beyond our human experiences with one another. The examples assume a relatively good human experience, and for many of us, this works. We rely on neighbors to pick up the slack when we are in a pinch. We

lavish our children with so many gifts and opportunities that it may be hard to picture what more God might do for them. For others, these examples just don't work. If God is caught up in a metaphor of neighborliness and familial love, access to this prayer model will be a dead-end street. Better turn to the psalms of lament for a more reliable entry point.

Our worship life centers, however, on this notion of prayer. Ask and it will be given you. Search and you will find. If this is our way, we had better be confident that we believe this, because we can be sure that there is a little child in a pew who is asking: Please, God, all I ask is that my parents get back together. Or please, God, I don't want my dad to go to Iraq. Or please, God, if I could just understand what I did wrong, maybe the hitting would stop. The answers to these big questions don't come in a sweet little song about seeking and finding. They come in the context of a community that is willing to wager—no, willing to stake its life—on the belief that prayers are answered and that God does respond to human need and suffering. To stake your life on this claim means letting God have access to your own hands and feet when they're needed.

Our worship life is centered on this notion of prayer. The Lord's Prayer is said, in some configuration, in almost every house of Christian worship, every Sunday, all across our land. In each of those places, worshipers believe that yes, God will bring a kingdom that is peaceful, that God will provide for our daily food, that God will forgive our unbelief and that God will shield us from trials that we can't handle. Despite the diversity in our traditions and practices, this simple little prayer may very well be our most basic common denominator.

On Pentecost Sunday I asked all those in the congregation for whom English is not their first language to recite the Lord's Prayer. The cacophony of sound blew the house down. (This is the upside of living in one of the most deliciously diverse cities in the world!) The sounds of language pouring in from the four corners of the earth gave us much to think about as we pondered the ability of the Holy Spirit to break through barriers of language and experience.

Access to that power is available 24/7. In the context of our faith communities, can the collective human experience be swayed? That's what we say we believe. When the flat words on the page morph and grow and imbed themselves into our hearts and minds, when children are handed a fish instead of a snake, when dead-end streets are opened for passage, metaphors for God's love are lived, not just imagined. Prayer isn't for dummies. It's for the faithful who, empowered by the Spirit

and supported in community, are willing to stake our lives on the belief that God will open the door when we knock.