

October 9, 2005
at Baker Memorial Church
St.Charles, Illinois

Preaching: Mark Dean Armstrong,
United Methodist Certified Lay Speaker

Primary text: Genesis 32:1-14

Secondary texts: Psalm 106

Philippians 4:1-9

Luke 18:1-8

Lord, can I ask a favor?

Let us pray.

Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O God our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

During the past week, here are a few of the prayers that were heard around our house:

- *Lord, please help me get my work done on time!*
- *Lord, please give me patience to deal with this situation!*
- *Lord, please help Paw-Paw get better after his operation!*
- *Lord, please help me make this stoplight so we won't be late for pre-school!*

Do any these sound familiar? If they do, then your house was probably a lot like ours last week. Oh, we do say a few prayers of thanksgiving—most often at mealtimes—and there are prayers of adoration, and prayers of confession, too. But the prayers most often uttered in the Armstrong house are prayers of intercession—that is, asking the Holy Spirit to intercede in our day-to-day activities.

So, the question comes to mind: Did He come through? Were we granted what we were asked? Well, I got enough work done to keep the roof over our heads, and food on the table. Patience, while not overly abundant in either Gina or me, was delivered in a great enough quantity that no one has been injured or killed. Paw-Paw—that is, Gina’s dad—came through knee replacement surgery and is now recuperating. And Ellie got to pre-school on time. So, I guess I can score God at four-for four—He hit for the cycle.

But sometimes, it’s tempting to discount the value of prayer. After all, I was the one who kept working to bring home that paycheck. Gina and I are the ones who took the deep breaths and gave patient responses to The Constant Asker of Questions who lives in our house. The doctors and nurses took good care of Gina’s dad. And well, the stop lights on Main Street are programmed by engineers at the Illinois Department of Transportation. So, if we can see all the causes behind an “answered prayer”, was the prayer truly answered? Is intercessory prayer any good at all? What’s more, if prayer was worthwhile, wouldn’t God do it without having to be asked? And if a request wasn’t worthwhile, wouldn’t God just say “No” anyway?

Well, seventeen years ago this fall, I got the answer to these questions. I was a young man living in an apartment on the near north side of Chicago. I had just move there, to a neighborhood called Bucktown, which was not the trendy, expensive neighborhood that it is today. It was a little, well, run-down, and a little, well, you get the picture. But it was cheap—\$295 per month for a larger one-bedroom apartment—and it was near the El stop at Milwaukee and Western Avenue. Anyway, I began attending the First United Methodist Church of Chicago—perhaps you know it as *Chicago Temple*. I taught Sunday School—some things never change—and joined the Young Adult Ministries group. Like here at Baker Memorial, new member classes were held in the fall, so even though I was active in the congregation, I still had not joined.

It was there that I had met a young woman, who was also active in the Young Adult Ministries. Now yes, I had prayed to God that I would meet my future wife—and no, this was not Gina that I met. This young woman and I dated for about three months—never very seriously—and then one Friday night we decided that we really weren't meant for each other and broke it off.

Now the next day was the all-day new member class. And guess what, folks? She was going to be in it, too. Now our breakup wasn't bitter, but I've never been one of those "we can still be friends" kind of guys. I was, well, *uncomfortable* with the idea of spending my Saturday next to someone I'd just broken up with, even if it was a church function. And after I got back to my Bucktown apartment, I sat on my couch and prayed:

Lord, can I ask a favor? I know you know everything, and it's probably wrong for me to even ask this, but wouldn't it be better if she just didn't show up tomorrow? You could have her miss the alarm and oversleep, or the el could be down for maintenance, or even something else . . . but wouldn't everyone be more comfortable if she skipped this class and joined next month? That'd be okay, wouldn't it?

Well, almost right away I felt a little shame that I prayed that prayer. By the next morning, I wasn't so "uncomfortable" with the idea of being in the same class as her, so I walked to the El, took the train into the Loop, and went to the class. I was the first one there, so I took a seat at the table in the classroom, helped myself to a doughnut—some more things never change—and waited for the class to begin.

The class started at 9:00 a.m. sharp. The young woman wasn't there when the pastor greeted us, but she usually ran a little late. By 9:30, we were talking about the Church Universal, and she still wasn't there. By 10:30, we were talking about the Wesleys, Thomas Coke, and Francis Asbury; she still wasn't there. By

lunchtime, it was obvious that she wasn't coming . . . and I must have looked guilty, because the pastor asked me what was wrong.

Well, I told the pastor everything. I told her about the breakup, and my awful prayer, and how this poor woman was not joining the church and it was all my fault.

And the pastor . . . smiled. I mean she had an ear-to-ear smile! And with a chuckle, she said, "Mark Armstrong! You mean to tell me that you've been a Christian all your life and you're still shocked *when God answers your prayer?*"

Well, I felt better that the pastor wasn't angry with me, but I still wasn't very pleased with myself. The next morning, I was received into membership at the parish, much like new members are in our church. After worship, we were in a receiving line, so we could be greeted by the congregation. One of the last people to come and greet me was *her*—the young woman who was absent from the previous day's class. After she greeted me, I couldn't think of anything glib or profound to say—again, some things never change—and I blurted out, "We missed you on Saturday at the class.

And she replied, "Well, when I was lying in bed Friday night before the class, it just hit me: *Wouldn't it be better if I just didn't show up tomorrow? Everyone would be more comfortable if I skipped this class and joined next month.*"

Well, then. My pastor was right. I had prayed for God to intercede, to make a change so that my life would be a little more comfortable for a few hours. It was an unreasonable request, and I shouldn't have made it. Afterwards, I even regretted asking it, a fact that God surely knew. *And he granted my prayer anyway!!!*

Today's Old Testament lesson is a good example of such a request. The Israelites were camped near Sinai, the holy mountain

of God. Shortly after the Ten Commandments had been delivered to the people, God called Moses to return to the mountain top; so Moses went, alone except for his assistant Joshua, who waited part-way up the mountain.

Moses stayed on the mountain top for 40 days, according to Exodus 24:18. During that time Moses received a great deal of instruction from God: directions for making the ark of the covenant, descriptions of ceremonial furnishings for the tabernacle, ceremonial garments for the priests, rites for the ordination of priests, and a full description of the Sabbath law. When God was finished, he gave Moses two stone tablets, that God himself had made with his own hand. The Bible takes seven full chapters to describe these days; by comparison, the description of the 40 days Noah spent on the ark takes up parts of only two chapters in Genesis. Obviously, this was important stuff going on!

But the Children of Israel were acting like, well, children. As we heard earlier, they saw that Moses had “delayed to come down from the mountain”, and they decided that they couldn’t wait another day. And when they made a golden calf to be their god, the LORD was furious. In a real sense, I can almost imagine his anger, now that I’m a father. I can almost hear him yelling: *You ungrateful kids! Here I’ve freed you from slavery, brought you out of Egypt, led you through the parted Red Sea, gave you quails and manna to eat, and brought forth water from a rock for you to drink, and the minute I turn my back, you’re up to no good!* Yeah. As a father, I can definitely imagine that speech. And frankly, as a former kid, I can imagine that speech from the other side. I am the youngest of four kids, and it seemed like my parents never ceased to be surprised by the amount of trouble we could get into when their backs were turned.

Anyway, back to Moses and God. God was indeed fed up with the Israelites, and he told Moses: *I have seen this people, how stiff-*

necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation. And God set out to destroy them.

I don't know how God was going to destroy them. He'd already used a flood, so that was probably out. Fire, maybe with brimstone? By the descriptions of the way this group acted, I suppose God could have just withdrawn from them and they wouldn't have lasted more than a few weeks, following their golden calf around in the desert. But here is the really surprising part of this story. Moses pleads with God for the lives of the Israelites. Three things are important about this. First, the Israelites surely don't deserve Moses' intercession before God. Like I said before, they had been personal witnesses to some of the greatest miracle in all history—yet they still turned away from God in what seems like a moment's notice.

Second, Moses probably wasn't very inclined to feel personal sympathy toward the Israelites. In Exodus 5:21 while the Israelites were still in Egypt, they accused Moses of giving Pharaoh a reason to kill them. In Exodus 14:12, at the shore of the Red Sea, the Israelites told Moses that it would have been better to die in Egypt than to be with him. In Exodus 16:3, while in the wilderness of Sin, the Israelites lamented that they wished they had been killed in Egypt rather than risk hunger in the desert.

In Exodus 17:4, at Rephidim, the Israelites were ready to stone Moses because they were thirsty. And as a father, I can imagine that while the Israelites traveled through the wilderness on their way to Sinai they must have said "Moses, are we there yet?" about a thousand times. But the most important part of this story comes in verse 14, when God responds to Moses' plea. Listen very carefully to the exact words: *And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.* Did you hear that? *He changed his mind.* Wow. As a kid, it was hard

enough to get Mom to change her mind when we were going to get punished. It seems had to imagine that God, who is omnipotent over all time and space, would actually change his mind. But that's precisely what scripture says.

And that gives us hope! In this scripture can have the assurance that God listens to our prayers. We have the assurance that he considers our petitions. And we have the promise that God intercedes in our lives, *even if we don't deserve what he is doing for us.*

In Luke 18, we are assured just that, as Jesus offers us a parable about our need to pray always and not lose heart. Jesus says just like the widow who kept coming to the unjust judge and asking for justice, we should continue to pray and ask God to provide our needs—and the needs of others as well. We do this here at church each Sunday in our prayer of intercession. We do this at meetings of our ministry areas and committees, as we pray that God will help us to be more effective in bringing the Good News to the poor, and that he will ease the burdens of those whom we love.

But these intercessions are small potatoes compared to the greatest intercession of all, which took place nearly 2,000 years ago on a hill outside Jerusalem, when God the Son offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of every man, woman, and child. I am telling you the truth: when Jesus was on that cross, he knew that he was dying for the sins of you . . . and me.

So let us resolve today to pray without ceasing, as Paul instructs us in Philippians 4, confident in the knowledge that God will hear our prayers and intercede on our behalf . . . whether we deserve it or not. AMEN.