

Foxtail

Preached FCCW July 28, 2019

Luke 11:1-13

It was on the Soldier Pass Trail, near the Devil's Kitchen sinkhole, but not quite as far as Sphinx Rock, that we came upon Foxtail. A half dozen of us were hiking with yoga bags slung over our shoulders, following our trail guide/yoga instructor Cherlita. Our destination was a level rock shelf near the Seven Sacred Pools, where we would drop our mats for a yoga class beneath a clear blue sky and surrounded by the grandeur of Sedona's natural beauty. Along the way, Cherlita would occasionally pause to teach us lessons about the history, geology and biodiversity of the area. During one of those stops, I crouched to get a better look at an interesting looking plant. "I wouldn't get too close to that", Cherlita warned. "That's Foxtail."

Which prompted an unscheduled lesson on the topic of Foxtail. While it may look inviting to touch, with its tufted, almost furry appearance, handling Foxtail is not advisable. As any local would tell you, the Foxtail plant poses hidden dangers to animals or humans that come into contact with it. One touch to a Foxtail plant can release seed heads which are shaped like tiny barbs. Once they become embedded in your skin, they work their way deeper into the tissue. They have been known to migrate to the lungs of animals that inhale them. Or to the brain, when they get into an animal's ears. The barbed shape of the seed heads makes them difficult and painful to remove. Cherlita's quick intervention spared me from learning an unpleasant lesson about Foxtail the hard way.

One day, on the trail that stretched between Galilee and Jerusalem, the disciples requested that Jesus give them a lesson... on prayer. "Lord, teach us to pray, as John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray" they asked. One piece of the lesson on prayer that Jesus taught them is very familiar to us. It's what we call the Lord's Prayer. You may have noticed that the version of this prayer preserved in Luke's Gospel is much shorter and simpler than the one we are accustomed to praying. Luke chose to give more ink to Jesus' teaching on **why** we should pray, rather than **what words** we should pray.

He begins with a parable about a man who is surprised by the arrival of an unexpected midnight visitor. Unfortunately, there is not enough food in the house to provide a meal for this guest. So, the man goes to a neighbor to ask for some bread to feed his visitor. But the neighbor, not wanting to be inconvenienced, tells him to go away and stop bothering him in the middle of the night. Jesus concludes with the statement that even though the neighbor won't get up and give him bread based on their friendship, he finally gives in because of the man's persistence in desperately knocking and begging.

So, what is Jesus saying? Is he saying that God is like the lazy neighbor who only helps his friend in order to get him to go away and leave him in peace? Does Jesus want us to believe that unless we bombard God with prayers, God isn't paying attention to our needs? And that if our

prayers go unanswered it might be our fault for not putting enough energy into our praying? That doesn't sound like the God we see when we look to Jesus. And it sure doesn't serve as a good motivation for praying.

However, those kinds of doubts about God do in fact burrow their way into our subconscious, and they can be every bit as infectious to our souls as Foxtail seeds are to our bodies. They can also be as difficult to dislodge once they have embedded themselves in our hearts and minds. But what if we have been putting the emphasis on the wrong place in this parable? What if the lesson is not meant to be on the reluctance of the neighbor to help, but on the attitude of the person doing the knocking?

The word that Jesus used to describe the man's persistence conveys more of a sense of unashamed boldness, than desperate pleading. The point on which the parable turns is not that it takes persistent hammering on God's door with our prayers to be heard, but that faith in God's desire for us to come to Him and God's eagerness to give us what we need will motivate our praying.

The parable is an example of what is known as "How Much More" reasoning. As in, if a self-centered neighbor will finally give in and do the right thing, how **much more would** God (who already wants to do the good thing) answer us when we pray? The persistence in praying we need is not to bend God's will by overcoming God's indifference to our needs. What our praying often needs is the boldness to overcome our own reluctance in believing in the goodness of the one to whom we pray.

Jesus goes on to ask his disciples, "Which of you, if your child asks for a fish, would give them a snake instead. Or if your child asks for an egg would give them a scorpion?" The obvious answer to that question is "I would never do that to my child!" right? So, if you or I, as imperfect as we are, would do our best to do no harm to our children by letting them have something that would hurt them, how much more can we trust God do the same, but even better?

But there are sometimes Foxtail-like seeds of doubt about God that creep into our minds and embed themselves there. Maybe we have felt like God's answer to our prayer was a scorpion instead of an egg. Undesirable circumstances in our lives can erode our confidence in God's judgement; which can scare us away from praying for God's will to be done.

The truth is that it is we ourselves who aren't always the best judge between fish and snakes, or eggs and scorpions. Sometimes a fish looks like a snake to us, so we avoid the good thing God is trying to give us. Other times, what looks like a delectable egg is really a scorpion God wants to protect us from. Foxtail teaches us—or at least it taught me—that some things that are appealing to the eye conceal hidden dangers.

In our imperfect knowledge, we may be praying for what we sincerely believe is the best thing, but which God knows will not be in our best interest. Have you ever been disappointed by a

prayer that went unanswered only to realize later that your prayer's rejection was actually God's protection from the very thing you wanted so badly? Or, even worse, have you ever regretted getting something you prayed for that turned out disastrously? I shudder to think of how my life might have turned out if God gave me everything I ever asked for.

Jesus said everyone who asks receives, but he didn't say we receive exactly what we asked for. He said we will receive the Holy Spirit. In other words, we will discover the presence and power of God in whatever our circumstances may be. We will make our needs known to God, and then leave the results to God's wisdom and judgment.

And that is the ultimate lesson about prayer. That it is not God's mind but our heart that is changed by prayer. That EVERYONE who asks for anything in prayer will receive, not necessarily what they want, but always what they need. EVERYONE who searches prayerfully will find God already seeking them. EVERYONE who knocks on heaven's door, will find God opening the door and offering us what God already knows that we need. The purpose of prayer is not to get what we want, but to receive what God wants for us; and to become the person God calls us to be.

The kind of person described in the Lord's Prayer.

A person whose highest desire is to see the values of God's kingdom come to be a reality on earth. A person who prays for God to provide **us** (not just me) with what is sufficient for the day, so that no one has more than they need at the cost of someone else being deprived. A person who can be forgiving to others because they are acutely aware of how forgiving God is to them. A person who trusts God to protect them in the face of evil; and so, can be more fearless in caring for others because they know God is with them in their trying times. A person who can do all of this only by prayerfully leaning on their faith in God's kingdom, trust in God's power and reflecting God's glory.

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