

SIMPLY PRAY
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17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Luke 11:1-13.

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This past Thursday I got to take 25 Community Vacation Bible School children on a five-mile hike up a mountain. Does that sound like fun or what? Yes, it was hot that day but the hike and the mountain were indoors. I guess I should explain.

The hike started in the air-conditioned sanctuary of New St. Methodist Church and ended in the vestibule. The five-mile hike took five minutes. That left me only fifteen minutes for the rest of the story, the story the planning committee had asked me to tell, the story of Jesus feeding 5000 people with just 5 bread rolls and 2 fish. (John 6:1-13)

Much to my surprise, it turned out to be a lesson on prayer.

Bible School began that day, as it did all week, with opening exercises at St. Agnes Chapel. There were about 70 or so children from the various churches in town. After opening exercises, the children walked a block to New St. Methodist Church for a Bible story and then finished their day with arts and crafts at Trinity Episcopal Church just one block from the Methodist Church. That's been the format for VBS for more than 15 years.

My group of 25 third to sixth graders filed into the front pews of the Methodist sanctuary, plopped down and stared at me as if to say: *I dare you to teach us anything we care about.* Little did they know: *I like that kind of challenge.*

First I told them my name and then, since we didn't have much time, they told me their names in one collective shout. Then we counted off by ones to practice for a bigger count coming up later and, most importantly, for me to find out if I had brought enough cheese crackers for all of them.

After the count I told them that Jesus was, among other things, a teacher. And once upon a time he took his 12 students on a field trip. And what's another name for "student," I asked? "Disciple," they fired back. These kids were sharp. I began to feel hopeful about the upcoming experiment.

One day Jesus took his students on a field trip. They sailed across a lake then hiked a long ways up a mountain. So let's pretend were going on that field trip with Jesus.

And so off we went hiking up and down the aisles and back and forth through the pews. We paused to catch our breath and complain, moan and groan, about our hungry stomachs since no one had packed a lunch—or so we thought.

At last we reached the summit and plopped down in the vestibule. On the way in I had secretly handed five children each a 6-pack of cheese crackers. That would be 30 single crackers in all. Enough for all—if things worked out.

WOW. We just hiked five miles up a mountain. Are you hungry? *YES.* Would you like a cheese cracker? *YES.* If you don't have a cheese cracker, raise your hand. All but five raised their hands.

Well, we've got a problem. Don't we? We're hungry and it doesn't look like we have anything to eat and what's worse here comes 5000 more people who didn't pack lunch. What would 5000 growing stomachs sound like? They let loose with a roar: *GRRRR.*

Five thousand people a long way from home and stores. You'd think somebody would have brought along a few crackers. I wonder if anyone of us did.

The five kids clutching their cheese cracker packs looked up at me sheepishly and said nothing. I waited. And asked again. I wonder if anyone has cheese crackers. Pause. Silence. Five kids nervously looked around.

Then one girl showed me her pack. WOW. Look here! What a surprise. One person has some crackers.

I asked if she'd be willing to share what she had. She said, yes. I invited her to stand beside me. With so few crackers and so many hungry people, what are we going to do? She shrugged her shoulders. Well, maybe we should simply pray and see what happens.

Now I'm not sure how Jesus prayed at his moment with 5000 hungry people but I'm guessing it went something like this.

Our father, you are good and you are great. You love all your children and fill the earth with good things, water to quench our thirst, food to satisfy our hungry stomachs. May your will be done for all your children, may your desires come true on earth. We all get hungry. We all have needs. Yet you give bread every day. Help us resist the temptation to keep it all for ourselves. And thank you for this little girl who is ready to share what she has with others. Amen.

Who doesn't have a cheese cracker and would like one? Twenty some kids raised their hands. Some shook them to get her attention. The little girl opened her pack of six crackers and handed them out to begging hands. Of course, they didn't go very far.

When she finished there was an awkward silence. Who still wants a cracker and doesn't have one? Hands shot up again. The four children still with cracker packets looked at all the raised hands and did nothing. The hands went back down. I wasn't about to give orders. This is what teachers call "wait time."

Who still wants one but doesn't have one? Again the hands went up. Still the four with the packs did nothing. I was still practicing "wait time" and beginning to think my clever experiment had failed when one boy stood up and said. *I'll share mine.* And just like that the other three did the same. Every child got something to eat.

While they were munching their crackers, I said, Jesus was a teacher. What lesson did we learn on our field trip today? And one child said: "There's enough if people share." And just like that lesson time was up. And off they trotted to their next stop.

Did they all get it? I doubt it. I'm guessing some did, some didn't. It's like casting seeds onto soil. Some sink in; others are snatched up by the birds. But I'm not worried. All of us learn little by little as we walk with Jesus, which is to say, as we live within the Beloved community, day by day.

And one thing we learn is how to pray. It's simple but like anything worth learning it requires patience, persistence, perseverance, and practice, practice, practice.

Luke 11:1-13 (abridged)

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

He said to them, "When you pray, pray something like this: Father (Abba), hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And then Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for another friend of mine has just arrived, and I have nothing to offer him.' And the man answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door

has already been locked, and my children are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because of friendship, he will get up and give him what he needs because of his persistence.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Who of you, if your child asks for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, would give a scorpion? If you then know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

We all ask for this and that but, as it turns out, God wants to give us a spirited life. We all want stuff. God offers something better. It's one thing to ask for stuff; it's something else to discover the Holy Spirit in your heart. Prayer opens the door for that possibility. Simply pray and see what happens.

Pray simply and see what happens. And did I mention prayer requires patience, persistence, perseverance and practice?