Sermon on Luke 11:1-13

*Awful Grace and Awesome Gift*

However far you stray, however distant God seems to you in your daily life, however aware you are of the faults that beset you, there is a way forward. This is the amazing good news of Jesus Christ!

In terms of what we’ve been talking about the last two weeks, perhaps you recognize that, unlike the good Samaritan and Mary, you are not half as aware of the mercy of God in you and through you as you know God wills.

Perhaps like Martha you are under a deluge of worry and distractions that stop you from truly paying attention to the one right in front of you; stop you from believing that your life is good and that in partnership with God you can craft a beautiful life.

There is a way forward! Now, this way forward stands as a possibility for each of us and as a community. There is nothing automatic about any of us or all of us finding ourselves engaging in and experiencing the beauty of that way forward, but at anytime, that way forward is closer to us than our own breath.

the Greek writer Aeschylus in the fifth century before Christ, far removed from Israelite wisdom, writing from a belief in the ancient Greek divinities, said this about “the way forward,” something I value:

“He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”

This gradual unfolding of grace, through thick and thin, through suffering, and yes, even against my will, has become an important touchstone for me as I very slowly learn the kind of love God has for the world and thus for each of us.

When I see how far my heart can wander, or how easily, through worry or selfish concerns, it gets sidetracked into a “not my problem” mentality, the more I realize that the sobering reality described in our first reading from the prophet Hosea can happen to anyone, to any community

And yet even there, the final word is not “you are not my people,” but “Children of the living God!”

I remember when Tim (not his real name) wandered into Church. His parents had told him that Church was “good” but had never gone. And so he never did, but one day, in a kind of desperation he and his partner came.

I could tell that they were first timers by the way they sat, holding each other’s hands closely, not understanding the weird rituals that make so much sense to those of us who’ve been for a long time but seem like hieroglyphics to those who are new.

When Tim came to see me the question he wanted answered was “How Do You Pray?” That’s the religious language for someone who’s saying “my life is not what I’d hoped it to be; the pain that cannot forget points to God’s will that I become, if even drop by drop, a better person, more attuned to mercy and grace in those I live with and encounter.” “How do you pray?”

He knew that to become the person he wanted to become more than observing rituals was critical. And so, over the course of months we prayed the Lord’s prayer together, not just the words but the way of understanding reality that they point to.

We prayed the Lord’s prayer starting with the immediate needs that Tim wanted help with, the ability to have a child with his partner, the ability to control his anger and the ability to becoming more loving.

He learned and, one can’t help being a co-learner even as a teacher, that to call God “Our Father” doesn’t mean “doting Father” but a Father who understands that liberty from sin, liberty from our anxieties, liberty to see the other through mercy instead of judgement is a journey of learning to trust “Our Father.”

Jesus knew of course that “Father” was first used as a name for God when Israel was freed from its slavery to Pharaoh. Father was not simply patriarchal language, it was freedom language.

How is it that this freedom comes? We pray not to “my Father,” but “our Father.” The Father’s freedom is a communal reality requiring human leadership and cooperation.

In the case of the Israelites, Moses, and the cooperation of the people with him; in my case, so many people have helped; in the case of Tim, I was there at the beginning and then others took over the cause, now Tim, in his own way helps others towards liberty.

The strange parable that Jesus tells about asking a neighbour at midnight and about continuing to knock is a demonstration of how this process is both relational but also awkward.

The Lord’s Prayer points to a reality, it isn’t a series of techniques, not a set of magic words but a reality that God opens up, a life in which we call out to God because we’ve become aware of great needs in us and in those we love.

We would rather be self-reliant but we don’t have the capacity to do it, so it’s often the awkwardness of what we’re experiencing that forces our hand, as in Aeschylus’ words, “and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”

As we encounter this very real but awkward reality we can grow.

As Tim came to understand, what was most critical for him and his partner was not that they actually had a child but that they became the loving couple in which a child, should there ever be one, could be nurtured and grow in love.

For several years they worked on this and when they finally had a child, a wonderful miracle, they were ready!

Again, “Our Father” is not Father Christmas, not “doting dad,” but “Our Father” who prepares us for the actual challenges of life. The most important lessons are often painful as our false images of ourselves are stripped away; as we come to realize that we’ve given ourselves to things, to pursuits, to goals, that are not in keeping with God’s kingdom.

But we do begin to pray “Give us our daily bread” with the realization that the sustenance we sometimes think is instinct that is clogging our spiritual capacity. We don’t need more food, more wine, more money.

There are people in our community who *do* need more food and money but for those of us here this morning, our deepest need is often to become more like the Good Samaritan!

There is real suffering in learning to let go of the control that we seem to feel is our right. And yet as we do we find that this “awful grace” is truly “awesome grace,” that we don’t need that old mindset, that we don’t need to hold onto bitterness, anger, the desire for vengeance against a former partner, against someone who’s done us wrong.

Forgive our sins as we forgive all of those indebted to us. I often struggle with this and often I’ve heard church members, even long-standing church members say “I can’t forgive, I won’t forgive so and so…”

Thank God we don’t have a doting Father but one who through the process of life brings us face to face with the false ego. It is arduous but we are not those destined for a vanquished life of those who can’t forgive.

For the one enabling our praying, and therefore our awareness of the way forward is not far away, but closer than our breath, the paradox of the “the awful grace of God” in Aeschylus’ phrase is that it’s the greatest gift: the Holy Spirit in us! A way forward indeed!