

## **Sermon for July 27, 2025**

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### **Teach Us to Pray**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the mediation of our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

There's a small town in Newfoundland called Gander. It was once known as the "Crossroads of the World" due to its perfectly positioned airport. Once the largest on earth, with runways big enough to land the space shuttle, it was a strategic location for refuelling and a bustling centre during wartimes. In more recent years, it was this very airport that made its community the focal point for human kindness and generosity. The world came to know Gander on September 11, 2001. As one of the few airports capable of handling the traffic when US air space closed that day, Gander welcomed almost 7,000 newly stranded passengers and their 38 international planes. Gander isn't a large town. Back then, the population was just over 9,500 persons and they made room for all those unexpected guests, along with eleven dogs, nine cats, and two endangered pygmy chimpanzees. While the townspeople sprang into action and prepared to house, feed, clothe and comfort these strangers, everyone on the planes were forbidden from disembarking. Once allowed off the planes and transferred to emergency shelters, the frightened and lonely passengers desperately tried to contact their families and prayed for their loved ones while the townsfolk worked through the night to help them in any and every way they could. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians up and down the Kittiwake Coast opened their homes and hearts to these strangers from all over the world. These travellers found warm beds and home-cooked meals during a truly terrifying time. The travelers were initially taken aback by their hosts' uncommon hospitality, but they slowly let their guards down and began to bond with the townsfolk and each other. To alleviate rising fear and mounting tensions, the townspeople even invited the passengers to be initiated as honorary Newfoundlanders at the local bar. The people of Gander offered not just food and shelter, but hospitality, kindness, generosity and community to fellow human beings in their time of need.

This true-life story of the people of Gander who encountered the inconceivable, overwhelming needs of those stranded strangers aptly illustrates Jesus' small vignette of the man who, being roused from sleep by his persistent friend, gives him the bread that he needs to feed a newly arrived guest. In an ancient culture without instantaneous communication and without all-night grocery stores, it is not difficult to imagine being surprised by the arrival of an unexpected guest and caught without the supplies needed for even basic hospitality. More surprising, however, is the picture of the friend abandoning all concern for decorum and personal dignity and boldly trying to rouse the sleeping neighbour to help. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

There must have been a lot of bold, persistent door knocking and asking and searching among the people of Gander that day...and a lot of prayers. All that dogged persistence resulted in good gifts being given to stranded guests. And I don't doubt for a minute that those stranded guests were also asking, searching and knocking for ways to find comfort and care in such a fearful time....and offering up a lot of prayers.

*"If you then, who are evil - that is, you who are sinful - know how to give good gifts to your children - to give good gifts to utter strangers - how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

This openness in prayer - this asking - brings about the risk of receiving the Holy Spirit! The Spirit's work is so much more than the provision of food and clothing and shelter. The people of Gander had already provided for those physical needs of their own volition by giving those strangers these good gifts. Jesus' vignette implies that if it is so among friends, with their mixed motives and self-interest, that is, their sinful nature, how much more so with God who wants to give us what is good and life-giving. Karoline Lewis, theologian, preacher and teacher, writes that Jesus maintains *"that God, whose goodness far exceeds even that of those human fathers who would never answer their children's requests with malice, can likewise be counted on never to give harmful gifts."*

Karoline goes on to write that, *"We need these words from Jesus today; words that help us remember a context we should never forget when it comes to*

*making meaning in our lives - the context of God. That whenever we say, "how much more?" from our places of hurt and pain and loss, God's response is, "how much more will I give you?" That whenever we voice, "how much more?" from our locations of abandonment and rejection, God says, "how much more do I promise to be with you? That whenever we utter, "how much more?" from our spaces of disillusionment and disappointment God says, "how much more do I love you?"*

*On the day we call, "how much more?" God answers us, increasing our strength of soul (Psalm 138:3), because for every "how much more?" we say and pray - which we need to say, have to say, cannot help but pray in our times of need and grief and longing, God responds with God's "how much more."*

The giving of the Spirit is the *"how much more"* Jesus is talking about. Remember what Jesus says concerning the Spirit? The Spirit will teach Jesus' followers and remind them of everything he has said (John 14: 26). Everything Jesus taught stemmed from the greatest commandment - to love God - and the second that is like it - to love one's neighbour as oneself (Luke 10: 26-28). And the result is God's desire: peace and harmony in all creation. As the psalmist wrote, *"Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts... Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky."* (Psalm 85: 8, 10-11)

The *"how much more"* is less about getting what we want than an invitation to recognize God's expansive goodness, recognizing the truth of God's nature - that God cares for humanity and acts redemptively on our behalf - and God's desire for a restored relationship based on love, not fear. God's *"how much more"* is an invitation to transformation. By the Spirit's power, we become Christlike in all we say, think and do. We are invited to become the persons God has made us to be - created in God's image to reflect divine love in the world.

Maybe what the people of Gander asked for was a miraculous supply of food, of beds, of clothing, of compassion and much more than that, God gave them the Holy Spirit. Maybe the strangers on those 38 planes asked for relief and

calm and much more than that, God gave them the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit worked among them in the serendipitous way the Spirit works to transform fear, grief and loss, suspicion and wariness, into loving relationships and a renewed community in which all were accepted no matter their faith, colour, race, gender or any of the differences that can separate people one from another. In this small community, hand-to-hand and heart-to-heart, the Kingdom of God drew near.

Amen. May it be so among us.

Let us pray.

God of infinite horizons, by your Spirit you are opening new places for our journey as your people. Give us eyes to see your kingdom. By your untameable Spirit, energize our souls for communities of promise and hope beyond the borders of language, skin color, economic or social position. Touch our lips to be the voice of grace and forgiveness. Use our hands and our feet to serve with love until in harmony we grow together into the fullness of your Christ. Amen.