

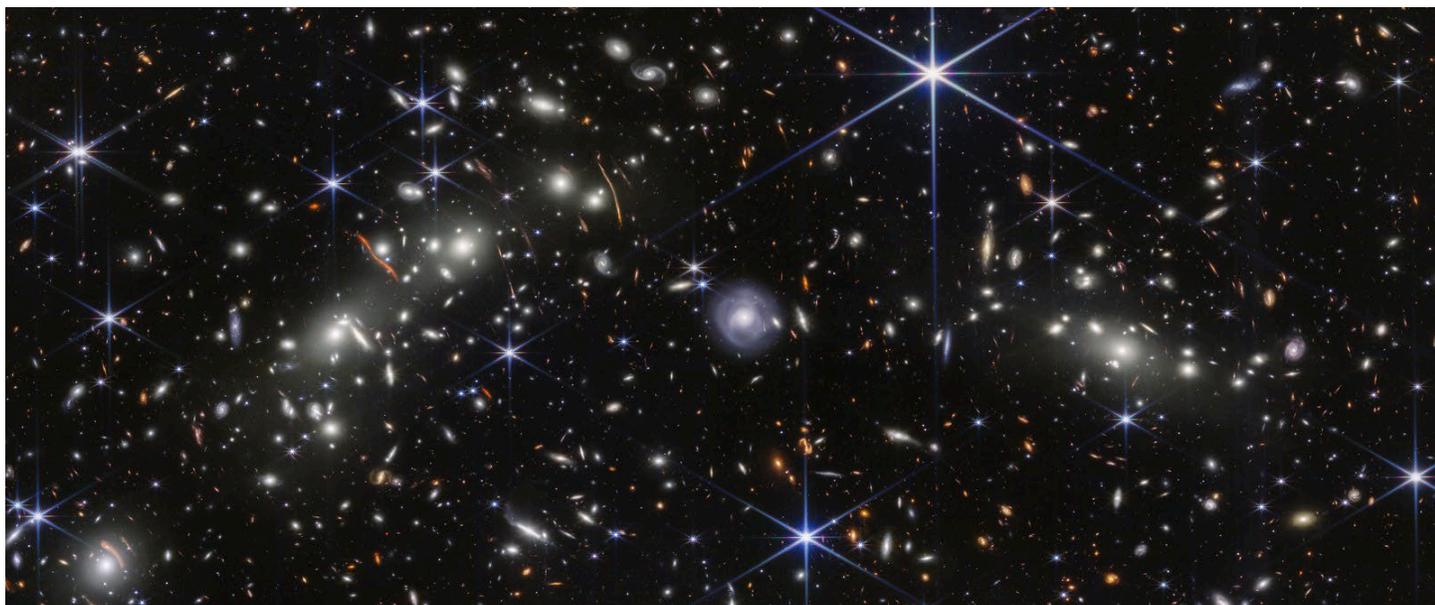
Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 27, 2025
Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13

"Just Ask"

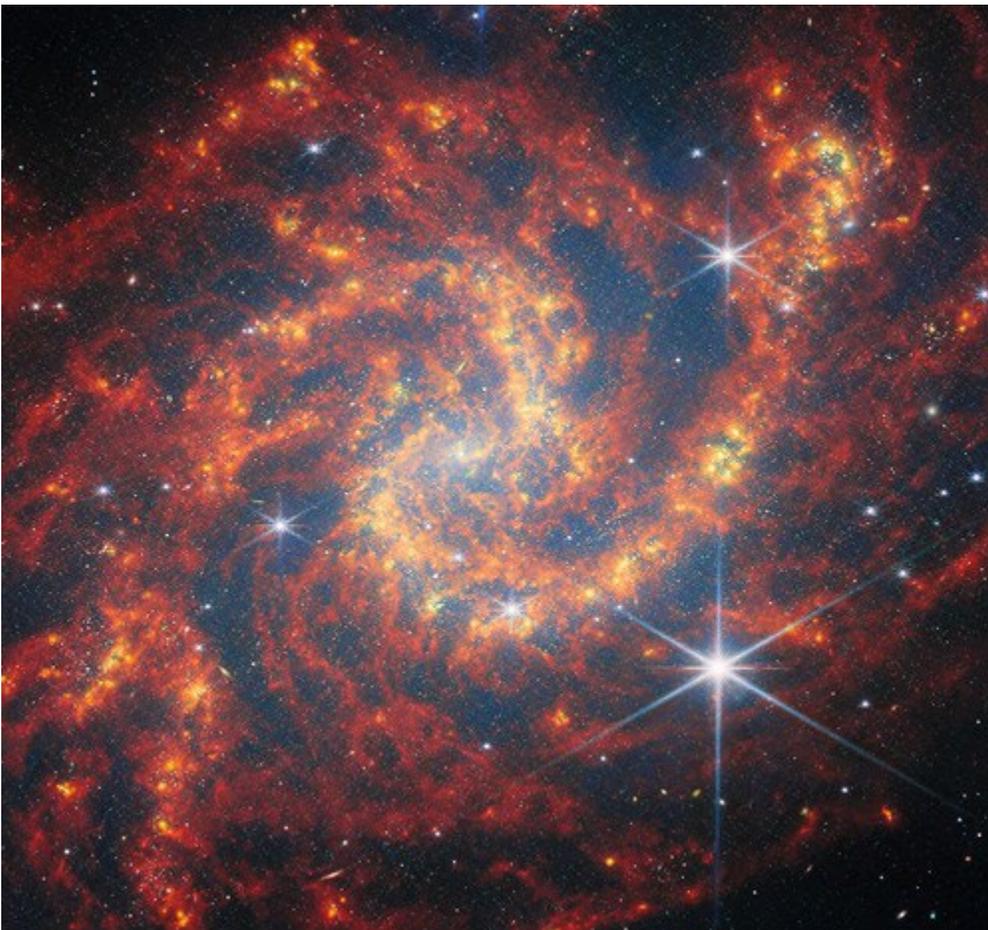
Over the last several years, we have received some stunning images of our universe from the Webb Telescope. The images were amazing for their detail and clarity. Previous images were mostly a blur but these sharply focused not just on stars but on galaxies that are so far from us that it has taken 4.5 billion light years for the light we are seeing in these images to reach the Webb Telescope.











Is that amazing or what?! Those lights are whole galaxies like our Milky Way Galaxy. It's just astounding to me how massive the universe is and that God created all of it – both what we can see and what is beyond our vision.

And do you know what is even more amazing? Our God who created the vastness of the universe loves us and actually listens to us when we pray. In view of the magnificence of the universe God has created it might be tempting to think that God has a lot better things to do than to listen to my puny prayers. But that's exactly the opposite of what Jesus came to demonstrate.

Not only does God listen to our prayers, God tells us how to pray. That is the genesis of the Lord's Prayer, according to Luke, which differs from Matthew's version, the one we use in worship. In the Lord's Prayer and his teaching following the prayer, Jesus teaches both the form and the substance of prayer.

The form of our prayers should be modeled after the Lord's Prayer. It is simple and straight-forward with an economy of language that enhances rather than detracts. Wordiness and flowery language are not necessary.

The prayer opens with a simple acknowledgement of our reverence for God and our desire to be a part of God's kingdom. The balance of the prayer deals with our basic needs - food, forgiveness, and faithfulness. The petitions of the prayer are simple - "Give us each day our daily bread," not a lifetime supply, but what we need for today. This is quite different from the prayers for material success which roll off the tongues of many a television evangelist.

The Lord's Prayer contains another simple petition: "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Of all our emotions, the ones that are probably the most destructive to us, the ones that keep us in bondage, the ones that prevent us from achieving our noblest aspirations and grandest dreams are guilt and grudges. Jesus teaches us that absolution from our guilt is intimately connected to how much or little we hold on to grudges. A place to begin absolution is by forgiving others. When we fail or refuse to forgive someone we are in essence allowing that person's sin to control our lives – not a healthy way to live.

The final petition, "and do not bring us to the time of trial," recognizes our weakness when it comes to a faithful life. Life inevitably involves trials and challenges that test our limits and abilities. But what the Lord's Prayer requests is that we not be brought to the ultimate test of our faith, meaning a life or death decision.

Remember that after Jesus resurrection and ascension, followers of Jesus were persecuted to death by the Roman empire. All the apostles except John died horrific deaths as a result of their commitment to their faith in Jesus as Lord. Many believers in other countries even today suffer persecution for their Christian faith. None of us want to face that kind of trial but the prayer our Lord taught acknowledges that a faith worth living for

must also be worth dying for. The Lord's Prayer is our declaration of dependence on God for sustenance, support and steadfastness.

When these are the substance of our prayer, God will hear and attend to these needs. This doesn't mean that God answers ONLY our most basic requests any more than I would suggest that parents provide only for their children's most basic needs. If we parents and grandparents who are imperfect in our love occasionally (or more than occasionally) break down and spring for the latest computer game or a new bike, how much more may God, whose love is perfect, respond to requests of ours which exceed the norm?

Because God's view of our lives is superior to ours, the Lord can see our needs more clearly, and differentiate between our needs and our wants. Yes, God answers all prayers, no matter how trivial or noble. The hard part for us to accept is that sometimes the answer is "no." When we approach God in prayer, we need to remember that, in the words of the theologian C. S. Lewis, "God is a loving Father, not a senile uncle."

Having given his disciples the form of prayer, Jesus tells them about the substance in a parable and a poem. The parable speaks of a person who goes to a neighbor in the middle of the night in search of food for an unexpected houseguest. Initially, the awakened neighbor says "no," but eventually relents and gives all that is asked because of the persistence of the man.

It is not so much that God has to be pestered into compassion by our persistence, as it is that through our persistence, believing despite doubt, hoping against hope, that we open ourselves to divine compassion. The essence of successful prayer is not whether we get what we ask for, but the effect a persistent conversation with God has upon us. In other words, the more we pray, the more we align ourselves with God's will for our lives.

The poem Jesus composes embodies much the same idea: "Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you." The substance of prayer is active, not passive.

What happens in prayer is, I think, something like this: We ask God to use our prayer as a channel through which God's love can flow into whatever situation, body or soul we pray for- our own or someone else's. The channel is apt to be clogged with doubt and self-concern (sort of spiritual cholesterol). In spite of the blockage, with persistence the power from God begins to trickle through anyway, transforming lives and hearts, perhaps the most important of which, for us, is our own heart. The substance of prayer is persistence in developing our relationship with God. The essence of prayer is asking, seeking and knocking.

Since most of us have not matured in our prayer life, our attempts to communicate with God are rather child-like. Maybe that's part of what Jesus alluded to when he set before his disciples and us, a child as our model. As Frederick Buechner puts it, this is appropriate because, "A child has not made up his or her mind yet about what is and what is not possible. A Child has no fixed preconceptions about what reality is; and if someone says that the mossy place under the lilac bush is a magic place, a child will wait until no one is looking and then crawl in under the lilac bush to see for himself."

In prayer, God invites us not into a magical place, but a miraculous one where we can speak unflinchingly of our deepest needs and pain knowing not only that our prayers are heard but also that we will be different people when we emerge on the other side of our prayer. What Jesus gives us in the form and substance of prayer is a way to stop crying, "Gimme," and start a deeper prayer, "Make me;" or "Transform me."

The value of prayer comes from the intensity of our relationship with God, which flourishes the more we pray. Jesus gives us a simple pattern for prayer and a reminder about the essence of prayer which we can put in the form of an acrostic: Ask, Seek, and Knock, the first letters of which, when combined, spell the most important part of prayer. ASK.

So, when you're up against it; when you're at your wits end; when you've hit a wall; when you're at a dead end remember to ask, seek and knock – Just ASK. When you're feeling content; when you're thankful for your blessings; when you're grateful for your lot in life remember to ask, seek and knock for others – Just ASK. When your health is failing; when your vision is dimming; when you're closer to the end of life than you are to the beginning remember to ask, seek and knock – Just ASK. When you're distressed by the shape of the world; when you're depressed by the divisions all around us; when you're disillusioned about the future remember to ask, seek and knock – Just ASK.

When you're....whatever you are, wherever you are, whenever you are ask, seek and knock. Just ask.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen