Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering: **Luke 11:1-13**

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book): Year C - Proper 12, Text: Luke 11:1-13
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary): Year C - Proper 12, Text: Luke 11:1-13

Synoptic Comparison

In **Matthew 6:1–8**, the background to the giving of the Lord's Prayer is as follows: Jesus warns His hearers against practicing their piety and praying just to be seen (verses 1–6). He warns against trying to manipulate God by using many words (verses 7–8). He then gives the Lord's Prayer as a guideline, but not a verbatim prayer.

In **Luke 11:1–4**, the situation is different. After seeing Jesus pray, the disciples ask that He teach them to pray — just as John the Baptist taught his disciples. Jesus responds by giving them the Lord's Prayer — in a form that differs from that in Matthew. He then tells them a parable to encourage them to pray with fervor.

Verses 11:5–8 (The Parable)

The parable opens with a question expecting the answer, "No! Never!" The question Jesus puts to the disciples runs along these lines: A friend from a distant village comes to your home just before midnight, and you must provide him with a meal and accommodation. But you don't have the necessary items to feed him as you should. So you go to one of your neighbors to borrow some bread, and the neighbor offers ridiculous excuses about a locked door and sleeping children. Can any of you imagine that happening? The Middle Easterner responds emphatically, "No, I cannot imagine such a thing! It could never happen!"

People in the West often misunderstand the parable due to a mistranslation. Many English translations suggest that the "friend" eventually responds because of the "importunity" (RSV) or "persistence" (NRSV) of the person making the request. However, the meaning of the parable becomes clear when the cultural setting is properly understood.

The key issue in the parable is the avoidance of shame. The NRSV translates the opening phrase, "Suppose." It should be translated, "Can any of you imagine... ?" In Luke 11:5, Jesus expects a negative answer. He is asking, "Can you imagine going to a neighbor, asking for help to entertain a friend, and getting this kind of response?" The oriental responsibility for a guest is legendary. The oriental listener/reader cannot understand how anyone might offer excuses when providing proper hospitality to a guest is at stake.

Verses 11:5–6: A man has a friend arrive at his home at midnight. In the desert areas of Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, it is necessary to travel by night due to the heat. It is not customary to do so in Palestine and Lebanon because of the proximity of the sea and sea breezes. Thus, the arrival of a friend at midnight is unusual.

But the host has a problem. He must set something before the guest, and the guest must eat — whether he is hungry or not. But he has no bread! He may have some "leftovers," but he cannot set them before his guest. To feed the guest with a partial loaf left over from a previous meal would be an insult. He must set unbroken loaves or pieces before him, and he must put before him more than he will eat.

The host does not plan to give bread alone to his guest. He will also give him a variety of items in dishes — and the guest will use the bread as his knife, fork, and spoon. The contents of the various dishes are never defiled from the eater's mouth because he begins each bite with a fresh piece of bread.

How does the host know from which house he should get the bread? Still today in Palestinian villages, women cooperate in baking bread, and it is known who has baked recently. The host's supplies are finished until the family's dough is taken to the village oven the next morning. On the other hand, the sleeper's house has recently completed baking a batch of loaves.

Although the host initially asks for bread, everyone knows that he also needs to borrow the meal itself that will be eaten with the bread. This becomes clear in v. 8, where the sleeper gives him whatever he needs. So, the host starts his round to gather up the greater

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portion of the meal from his neighbors.

Note the situation: First, the host is a host, not a borrower. He is not asking for anything for himself. Second, he goes to one friend to honor a second friend. Third, he is asking for the food of bare subsistence.

Verse 11:7: The situation is often misunderstood as follows: The host goes to a neighbor's home, knocks at his door to get his attention, and calls out that he needs some bread to feed his guest. The neighbor initially ignores him and hopes he will go away. But the neighbor keeps on knocking until he gets what he wants. But in the text, the host does not knock. Only a stranger knocks; a friend calls. When he calls, the neighbor recognizes the voice and is not frightened.

Verse 11:8: The suggestions that a "friend" responded due to the host's "importunity" (read as "annoyance") miss the point, and are misleading translations. The translation should be "sense of honor," and the reference is to the man inside, not to the man outside.

Westerners wishing to understand this parable must note that in Palestine still today, a guest is the guest of the community, not just of the individual. This is reflected in the language extended to a guest: "You have honored our village" and never, "You have honored me." Thus, the community is responsible for hosting and entertaining a guest. A guest must leave with a good feeling about the hospitality of the village. Due to the sense of close community in life in the Middle East, and due to the role that hospitality plays, borrowing there has been developed into a fine art.

The host is not necessarily a pauper. He may have plenty of food. When he says, "I have nothing to set before him" (11:6), he means, "I have nothing adequate to serve my guest so that the honor of our village will be upheld." Again, the appeal to the community is the main point.

The neighbor acts, therefore, not necessarily for the sake of friendship, but for the sake of his reputation. He knows that the host must gather up the essentials for the banquet from the various neighbors. If he refuses, the story will be all over the village by morning. The sleeper will be met with cries of "Shame!" everywhere he goes. To avoid shame he will arise and grant what the borrower wants. The host is asking the sleeper to fulfill his duty to a guest of the village. As long as the request is modest enough, refusal is unthinkable.

Next day, the traveler goes on his way, and all in the village turn out to bid him farewell. The traveler has been provided with food fitting the occasion and a place to sleep. The village has honored its obligations! The host's reputation is intact. The neighbor's good name is preserved. Both have risen to the occasion!

Verses 11:9–13: This section is a separate unit, not part of the previous story. Verse 11 is a parable composed of three comparisons. To understand it, we must know that in Palestine, bread, fish, and eggs are the ordinary food of the common people. Furthermore, a round stone can look like a round loaf. There is little outward difference between the snake of the sea (eel) and the snake of the land, which is an ordinary snake. A scorpion all folded up looks like an egg.

Travelers to Palestine in previous centuries speak of a type of fish (*barbut*), then found in the Sea of Galilee, that could reach five feet in length, crawl on land, and had the appearance of a snake. It was classified among the unclean fish. It is likely that this was the "snake" of the story. A fisherman's net would regularly catch both edible fish and eel-like creatures, and he would cast the latter back into the sea as unclean. Hence, the meaning of 11:11 seems to be: "If a son asks his father for a fish, will he give him a snake out of the sea?"

In short, Luke 11:9–13 teaches that as a father will always give his son good gifts, those who ask God can be assured that He will give them even better gifts than those a father gives a son!

Note the following: Luke 11:5–7 and 11:9–13 teach that God is a God of honor and that people may be sure that their prayers are heard. The One to whom they pray is willing to listen and to grant them the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit (11:13).

God's will for His children is that they love and serve each other as God loves and serves them. Their Lord and Heavenly Brother, although King of the universe, took upon Himself the form of a Servant and washed His disciples' feet. His brothers and sisters are to pray that they might constantly reflect the mind and manner of Jesus in their lives.

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