

Sermon for Sunday, July 24, 2016

PERSIST IN PRAYER

A man, traveling by dark to escape the intense heat and blinding glare of the Palestinian sun, arrived at midnight at the home of a friend. His arrival was unexpected, and his friend had no food to offer him. But the simplest hospitality required that a host break bread with his guest before they retired to rest. So he was embarrassed. What could he do? He ran to his neighbor's house, hesitated a moment because of the late hour, then boldly knocked on the door. "Who is it?" came the gruff, half-asleep reply. "Friend," answered the embarrassed host, "lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." Now his humiliation was public knowledge. "Do not bother me!" came the terse retort. "The door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything." In those days a family slept in one bed in order to keep each other warm. And the door was locked not so much to keep intruders out, but to keep the livestock in, which also bedded down within the tiny dwelling. To give aid to his friend meant disturbing the entire household. But the friend would not be dissuaded. Shamelessly, he implored his neighbor again to come to his aid. "Please, you must help me." And that was true enough. The neighbor, by Jewish law was required to get up and honor his friend's request. The conventions of hospitality for the sojourner were a sacred duty. The reluctant neighbor was shirking his religious obligation. At last, realizing that there would be no rest as long as this racket was going on, the neighbor, muttering invectives under his breath, rose and made his way to the door. "Here! Take your bread, and be off." Concludes Jesus, "Even though he will not get up and give him anything because his is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs."

The overt message of the parable is straightforward: "If you then, who are evil, 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?" You can, and should, expect good things from God. The embarrassed friend went to his neighbor, because he expected him to come through with help, and according to Jewish law he had every right to expect such assistance. But he came a cropper of an unrighteous person who sought to shirk his appointed responsibility. Yet the petitioner ultimately received exactly what he asked for. Why? Because he persisted in his request. He knew what was his right to expect from his neighbor, and he persisted shamelessly until he got it. How much more then can you and I expect from God, who is righteous, if we place our request before him in a spirit of persistent prayer? So the first lesson of his story is that we can, and should, expect God to deliver on God's promises.

But what are we to make of the emphasis on shameless persistence? Luke places this parable in the context of teaching the disciples about prayer. And clearly, Jesus is applauding the persistence of the neighbor in need. It is because he persists in his petitions, that he is rewarded.

Jesus wants us to identify ourselves with this poor, unfortunate fellow, for whom things turn out well in the end, because of his willingness to persist in his petitions to the one who is supposed to help him. Why? Because a willingness to persist in our petitions to God, says something very important about us and our faith.

First, it says that we know we have a need that is beyond our capacity to fulfill. The proper attitude of prayer is one of deep humility, perhaps even embarrassing humility. The petitioner in our story demonstrates this important attitude. He is willing to embarrass himself for the sake of his need, even shamelessly. And he is willing to do so for the sake of another, who has come to visit him.

No one persists in prayer out of an abstract sense of duty. After all, prayer is not a particularly amusing or entertaining form of recreation. We only pray persistently out of a sense of need. It's kind of like learning to brush your teeth. As youngsters most of us were terribly inconsistent about brushing our teeth. That's because it was a duty, laid upon us by our parents. But when we matured, and learned that we needed to brush our teeth if we wanted to keep them, then we became religious about brushing our teeth. The discipline of persistence comes from an identified and embraced need.

The proper attitude for prayer is one of humility, in conscious recognition of our deep need for help. That's why the classic pose for prayer is on one's knees with head bowed, and hands folded. When you are willing to persist in prayer, it shows that you sense your need for outside help, so much so, that you are willing to humble yourself, and even embarrass yourself, in order to get it.

Second, persistence in prayer shows that we recognize the power of God to be able to meet our need. The friend at midnight knew that his neighbor had the bread he needed. So he petitioned him. When we pray to God, we acknowledge that God is God, that he is friend and neighbor, that he is our loving Father; that God is the one to whom our prayers are properly directed.

Often our prayers are misdirected. Instead of petitioning the Lord, our God, we ruminate on the wishes of our own hearts, or meditate on the ideas in our own heads. Prayer that is directed to God seeks to rehearse and respond to God's salvation story, and to God's will. In so doing it reaffirms the loyalties, the promises, the commitments upon which the Christian seeks to determine all the activities of his or her life.

My nighttime prayer begins like this: "Heavenly Father, I pray your gracious blessing upon me." It begins with me, with my felt need for God. It is my confession, that without God's blessing, I am nothing. It is my admission, that God's blessing must be gracious, because I have not earned it by my actions. It is my declaration, that God is God, and that only God can answer my prayers for my family, for those in need, and for the world. With those brief words, my heart kneels before God, with head bowed, hands folded, and pleads, "Have mercy upon me, O God, a sinner in need." God is the one to whom our prayers are directed, because God is God, and God can meet our need.

Finally, persistence in prayer says that we have faith in God, that is, that we fully expect God will answer, that we trust God to respond. Again, the friend at midnight expected his neighbor to help him. So he persisted. He counted on his neighbor to come through for him.

God is our Father, even more than he is our friend or our judge. God loves us. God will not deceive us. God will not give us a stone when we ask for bread, or a serpent when we ask for a fish, nor a scorpion when we ask for an egg. God will give us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the conveyer of all good things.

Each week I write a sermon, I pray for God's help. Sometimes it's because I'm stuck and need some new insight to pull the message together. Always it's because I don't want my incompetence to get in the way of the gospel, and I count on God to answer. Persistence, though, is the key. Not because God is unwilling to answer upon my first request, but because upon my first request I am deceiving myself, my prayer is not quite genuine, my need not so keenly felt and defined. But by persisting in my prayer I find my heart guided by the Holy Spirit to achieve that humble attitude of prayer that prepares me to listen for God.

We do not need to persist in prayer for God to answer us. We need to persist in prayer to put ourselves in the proper attitude so we can hear God's response. Faith is a receiver phenomenon. We are uncomfortable with the way Jesus compels us to identify with the receivers, with those who are needy, humble, imprudent, helpless and sometimes foolish. We would rather identify ourselves with the givers, with the self-sufficient, important and powerful, like the homeowner. But Jesus won't let us, because those persons turn out to be uncaring, heartless, irreligious, mean-spirited scallywags. Jesus put it this way: ask, because you feel your need; seek, because you know the fulfillment of your need lies beyond yourself; knock, because you expect an answer, because you know that the door is always opened to those who seek entry. So be persistent in your prayers to God. It is the attitude that will open your heart to receive God's gracious and saving answer.

PRAYER: O Lord, our God, help us when we approach you in prayer to begin with the proper attitude. Help us to feel our need, to recognize you as the only one who can fulfill that need, and to trust that you will answer us, that we may persist shamelessly in our relationship with you. Not in our name, but in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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Luke 11:5-13