

Be Persistent in Prayer

Part 3 of Sermon Series:

Action Required

a sermon based on

Luke 11:1-13

and delivered on

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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In the Gospel lesson today, his disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. Then he says, when you pray, pray “like” this... Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name... or “holy is your name.” We know the prayer, we call it the Lord’s Prayer, because the Jesus, our Lord, taught it. It’s good to pray those words he taught, but let’s take it a bit further. Shall we?

As we look at the Scripture, let’s notice a few things. First, the disciples ask to be taught “how” to pray not for the correct words to pray. That fits with Jesus’ reply, to pray “like” this. Notice he didn’t say, “When you pray, say these words.” Praying those words, however, is a means by which we claim the fullness of Christian prayer by praying together with Christians across denominations, languages, and time. So we continue. But too often, we stop here.

How do we pray? Like this. We pray either with these words or with the prayer as a model.

But Jesus kept going when he started talking about banging on a friend’s door in the middle of the night. This story that follows is a part of Jesus’ instruction about *how to pray*. Did you notice, there’s no pause – no break in the dialogue? He just keeps going. Even though we hear that persistence paid off with the cranky friend roused from his slumber (I can relate. Just ask Susan. She even has coffee ready for me when I wake up, even though she doesn’t drink it.) – so we might project that onto the one in his home with an observation that the even in his crankiness (or maybe because of it) he gave in just to get the guy at his door to go away. Right?

Except that that’s not how those listening to Jesus would have heard it. Two factors converge in this example. The first is an Israelite’s obligation to show hospitality to a guest. That’s why the one knocking on the door is so desperate. A guest arrives unexpectedly, and he’s unprepared. He’s only asking for bread, so he’s not without anything to offer; but bread is important. In these communities, bread would have been baked in a community oven, so everyone would know who had how much bread and who may have some to spare. This isn’t a random request from someone who might not have bread himself. That’s the first factor.

The second factor is that it would be unimaginable to help your friend and neighbor in his time of need if you have the means. Proverbs 3:28 says, “Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it’—when you have it with you.” The neighbor shared his bread because it would be shameful not to do so, and he’d be shamed in the community.

This is important. How often do we withhold prayer because we don’t want to pester God? How often do we hold on to burdens because, we don’t want to use up God’s good will? Have you ever thought of it that way? I never put it into those words until I was composing this sermon; but, when I think about it, there have been times. Maybe it’s because we sometimes conflate the parable Jesus tells in Luke 18 – the parable about the widow who keeps after the godless judge in her quest for justice and his words, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” (Lk 18:4b-5) And we forget how Jesus follows up saying, “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will *quickly* grant justice to them.” (Lk 18:6-7a)

When we go back to the passage from today, what are the next examples that Jesus gives. These – like the first example – are rhetorical questions. Because of course a parent wouldn’t give a hungry child asking for bread a snake, or a scorpion in lieu of an egg. That’s just ridiculous! And that’s why Jesus used that example. It’s ridiculous to think that a parent would do such an awful thing. It’s unimaginable that a friend would actually turn down a neighbor in need. It’s ridiculously unimaginable, that God won’t bless our prayers.

Let’s go back to that man in his bed. The Greek word *anaideia* which was translated as “persistence” in verse 8: “tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.” A more direct – and maybe better translation of that word is “shamelessness”.

Think about it. He was shameless. He was the one who was unprepared. You might even call him rude for waking his neighbor. In bed with his children and the door locked. Think

about all that that means. People lived in one – maybe two – room homes. His children were literally in bed with him. Getting up would mean waking them up. Parents? Does that sound like a good idea? And yet there's that social contract – that social expectation – that he would do it – to avoid shame himself.

Jesus isn't inviting us to pester God, here. Jesus is telling us that God our Father, wants us to pray even when we think we don't deserve it or we might be a pest. Look, at these others, they answer the pleas of their neighbor and their children, isn't God better than human beings?

That doesn't always mean that God will answer our prayer to our specifics. But he does answer, even when people are annoying. When Israel cried out for bread in the wilderness reminding Moses how "good" they had it in Egypt, God provided sustenance that would appear each day in the dew – and good for that day only – food which they called *manna* "bread from heaven" – "Give us this day our daily bread." (Ex 16) When they complained about their thirst, God brought water out of the rocks. (Ex 17)

Think about that. Ponder that. God didn't answer their prayers because of their righteousness, but despite their orneriness – because he loved them. And he loves each of us. He loves you so much that he sent bread from heaven in the body of our Lord, Jesus Christ. He was even born in Bethlehem. In Hebrew, *Beth* – "house of", *lehem* "bread." He didn't wait for you to be right, but so that you could be.

Now let's be clear. We can't manipulate God. Sometimes we can negotiate like Abraham did when he was trying to spare the people of Sodom – not out of personal advantage, but because he was made in the image of God and it pained him to consider so many people lost – as it did God.

Sometimes our prayers go "unanswered" for a time until our prayers change to what is good for us. God knows best. As Jesus says, in Matthew 6:8, when talking about those who make lofty and articulate prayers to impress others, "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Your prayers don't even have to be good, just sincere, as St. Paul reminds us saying, "God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." (Ro. 8:27)

A good father may not give his child a snake when she asks for bread, but he also hears the request as a plea for nourishment, and won't serve her Twinkies for supper. Right? The manna that the Israelites wasn't what they expected but what they needed.

But then sometimes God answers prayers closer than we think.

Let me tell you about Dodie Gadiant. Her story appeared in a newsletter called Our America. I wish I could tell you when it was published but I don't have that. Anyway, Dodie was a school teacher and had decided after thirteen years of teaching that it would be a good idea to visit all the places she taught about. So she took off on a solo trip in a pickup truck towing a camper. Then one day, in the midst of rush-hour traffic, on I-5 outside Sacramento, California, the water pump on her truck went out. She was stranded – scared – alone – blocking traffic. And no one was stopping to help. (Although I don't know the date the story was first published, my source is from before cellphones were prominent.) She was desperate. And so in her desperation, she prayed. And she was specific, "Please God, send me an angel... preferably one with mechanical experience." Within four minutes a motorcycle pulled up in front of her. The rider had long hair and beard, tattoos (again before they were a thing like they are now). He popped the hood and went to work, without even speaking to her. Then he waved down a bigger truck so that they could tow the 56-foot rig off the freeway and onto a side street, where he went back to work.

Exasperated and intimidated, it wasn't until then that she noticed the patch on the back of the leather jacket, "Hell's Angels – California."¹

When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he didn't just give them words to pray and an example, he told them how to pray expecting God to answer, inviting them to be persistent – not to pester God, but because God is always – let me repeat that – ALWAYS – ready to hear our prayer whether we think we're worthy or not – our prayers do not bother him – they don't upset him – they please him.

To paraphrase Mick Jagger, You can't always get what you (think you) want, But (when) you (pray) sometime you find, You get what you need.² Then again, sometimes, like Dodie, you might just get more than you ask for.

God only requires one thing to hear your prayers. There is action required. I hope you've heard it already, today. But to be clear – for God to hear your prayers – you gotta pray. Be shamelessly persistent, even when you don't think or believe he will or even wants to hear, because Jesus tells us that he does, and he showed us on that cross how desperately God loves us despite our own failings and self-doubt – he put his confidence in us. AMEN.

¹ Craig Brian Larson, *Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Baker Books, 1993) 122.

² <https://genius.com/The-rolling-stones-you-cant-always-get-what-you-want-lyrics> accessed July 28, 2019.