

Persistence
Luke 11:1-13

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost/ 24th July 2022

It's probably the one issue people of faith struggle with most: *prayer*. In many surveys over the years here at CPC, the adult education committee almost always receives requests to do a workshop or offer a seminar on prayer. The PrayerFest we offered last spring flowed from those requests. The PrayerFest was a great success. We had a great response; received good feedback; and we were told to do it again. One thing most noticeable about the event was that there were mostly women in attendance. I'm not sure what this says about the prayer life of men, because I know men do indeed pray – actually, we need a lot of prayer. Maybe some guys are just reluctant to admit they need help.

I'll confess, though. I'll put myself in that category. I need help. When I hear the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray," I can resonate with that. I need help. I pray, but I wouldn't call myself a "prayer warrior." I know people who can spend hours at intercessory prayer, praying over every aspect of their lives. I don't do that. I pray and know the power of prayer. Prayer changes things. It makes a difference in my life. And, according to Jesus, our praying has the capacity to change the world. I pray regularly, but I don't have a pattern or rhythm or a set-schedule. I know people who go into their "prayer closets," a special place to pray with God. I don't have such a place. I have shelves of prayer books, books on the theology of prayer, spirituality of prayer, you name it, but I wouldn't say I'm an expert. Many of these books were purchased during a season in my life when I said, "I need to deepen my prayer life," and then the rest of life gets in the way of my plans, the half-read book is placed on the shelf until the season comes around when I say, "I need to deepen my prayer life," and I buy another book. It's a great way to build a library! But it's a lousy way to learn how to pray.

In the schoolhouse of prayer, we're all students, we're all disciples, and we all have much to learn. But, I'm beginning to be a little suspicious of all the books about prayer on the market these days, books about the secrets of prayer, books on the techniques and methods of prayers, or yet another collection of someone else's prayers.^[1] Jesus didn't need prayer manuals or prayers written by others. Jesus – *prayed*. He didn't learn about prayer, *he prayed*. He didn't worry about deepening his prayer life, *he prayed*. He got on with it. For Jesus, prayer wasn't an option; it wasn't something he got around to after the end of a busy day or something he turned to in a time of crisis. My guess is he never went very long between prayers; it was a constant in his life. In Mark's gospel, in particular, there is a clear rhythm of prayer and minister, prayer and ministry, throughout his life. Jesus prayed. He just did it. A lot. His disciples knew he prayed, for he was forever going off by himself to pray. They knew how central it was in his life, in his ministry. They didn't know how to do it. So one day they asked him. And he told them – tells us. This is how you pray...

"When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name...'" We know how the rest goes. We pray these words every week in worship. "Every day, in countless languages, in public and private, in virtually every country of the world, this prayer ascends to God. It could be argued that no single minute passes when it is not being uttered."^[2] Yet, it's used so often and it's so

well-known (like Psalm 23 or 1 Corinthians 13), that we might say the words or hear them said without really connecting with what they say, without really hearing them. It's so easy to miss what's contained in this prayer, the only prayer we have from Jesus. For example, try praying the Lord's Prayer some time, whether here in worship or at home, being attentive to every word. Concentrating on the meaning of every word, see if you can get through the prayer without being distracted, without having a wayward thought (such as, *I wonder what I'm going to have for lunch?*) or any other association. It's not easy.

What Jesus gives us in his prayer is both simple and profound at the same time. He shows us that, on the one hand, the structure of prayer is not really all that complex. The "how" of prayer is really very simple. There are two accounts of the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament, Matthew's version and Luke's version. Both authors are quoting from an earlier source biblical scholars call "Q," for the German word, *Quelle*, meaning, "Source." Matthew's version is wordier than Luke's. His version of the Lord's Prayer consists of seven imperatives or demands of God (they're more than petitions). Luke's is simpler; there are only five imperatives. Let's look at Luke.

After the address to God as Father, suggesting an extraordinary intimacy between Jesus and God, Jesus makes five imperatives that are amazingly comprehensive and far-reaching. That's how we start in prayer as well, in our address to God. The kind of relationship Jesus had with God, as son to Father, is the same kind of relationship with all of God's children. We are all sons and daughters of God who can be assured of a similar kind of human-divine relationship. With just one word, "Father," Jesus echoes his use of the Aramaic, "Abba," Daddy, for God, signifying an extraordinary intimacy. Suggesting a level of closeness between humanity and God was unheard of in First Century Judaism.

And notice, Jesus "didn't respond by suggesting some technique or regimen. He said that genuine prayer depends upon knowing the character of God rather than human effort." ^[3] Knowing God as Father (the best, possible Father), as kind and benevolent parent, as Daddy then shapes the way we pray (and we can push this, I believe, to include Mommy, because the point is parental trust). How we view God, our own personal images of God, have considerable power over how pray and when.

Then pray this way: **Imperative 1:** Hallow the name of God. Sanctify the name. Remember to set the name of God above and apart of all names. It declares God's absolute difference from all created things, God's otherness. The sense of this imperative is: God show up! God be holy! God be God! Remember who you are!

Imperative 2: Ask for the kingdom. "God, bring the kingdom. Bring the rule of God into the world of humans." The term "kingdom" is used 123 times in the four Gospels. It's at the heart of Jesus' ministry. He was unique among his peers to see that the kingdom represents God's rule of love and justice not in some far-off distance, but in the present. In many ways, this imperative sets the tone for all the others; it establishes the horizon or purpose of every prayer uttered to God, that God's kingdom of love, healing, justice come and be real among us. That was the core teaching of Jesus' ministry. Every healing Jesus offered, every teaching, every parable points to the importance of God's kingdom. Even the way we understand the cross and

resurrection must be seen in light of the central kingdom of God. Although there's no petition for God's will to be done here, "on earth as it is in heaven," as we find in Matthew's version, it's implied in this simple request: "Your kingdom come."

Imperative 3: Give us each day our daily bread. It's a challenge to make sense of this, to be honest, because there's a Greek word [*epiousion* from *epiousios*] Luke uses which in the vast body of Greek literature available to scholars today is only found here. It means more than: may there be food on the table or may we have a well-stocked refrigerator or freezer. It could be translated, "daily" bread, "future" bread, or "necessary" bread. But perhaps the best understanding suggests "the bread we need."^[4] This is not a request for God to help us live a simpler life and reduce our caloric intake. Instead, it suggests a plea that God remind us that the future is not in our hands, that so much of our lives are beyond our control; that sometimes we have to trust that indeed the Lord will provide, that we have to count on the hospitality of strangers in order to find the food we need to survive. It's to live knowing that the things we most need come from God and not from amassing our own resources.

Here, perhaps, is a good illustration of this. A year ago at this time there was an article in *The Washington Post* about six Franciscan friars, dressed in their long, brown robes and sandals, who made the trek from their abbey near Roanoke, Virginia, to Washington, DC, more than 300 miles. They didn't have a plan, they didn't have any money. For six weeks they walked relying on the providence of God and the kindness of strangers to feed and shelter them. Each day they didn't know where they were going to spend the next night. Each morning they didn't know where the next meal was going to come from. The people they met responded with considerable curiosity (and suspicion) and a lot of generosity. People pressed dollar bills into their hands, provided shelter. One mother of three saw them walking along Lee Highway in Fairfax, so she pulled over her minivan and offered to buy them lunch at Chick-fil-A. Everyone was staring at them, the brothers said. "The high point was when the guy dressed up like a cow came out and gave us all high fives. He was in costume. They were in robes. A lot of people were wondering what was going on."^[5] They were living out the meaning of "give us this day our daily bread." Living this way makes us odd. When we get glimpse of the oddness of the kingdom, people often wonder what is going on, because it makes no sense. Yet, from the perspective of most kingdom living is odd.

Imperative 4 is simple. *Forgive*. The gospel is all about forgiveness. Demand forgiveness of God, because forgiveness is the way of the kingdom. Then we demand God to help us forgive those who are indebted to us, either because of the wrong we have done them or they, us.

Imperative 5 is probably the most confusing. We say, using Matthew's versions, "Lead us not into temptation," and probably think this means protect us from the temptation of Satan. Here, the term is not "temptation," but "trial," or literally, "testing." What trial? What testing? The trying of followers of Jesus who are up against a world of injustice and cruelty, who are up against a world of people who do not seek first the kingdom, who resist the kingdom, who can't stand the kingdom, who can't stand justice and peace, love and forgiveness and will do whatever it takes to thwart the work of God. The testing refers to Christians who are tested, put to the test because of their trust in God by people who are not receptive to kingdom

ways. Jesus assumes here that this imperative is needed because to be his follower means we will experience hardship, persecution, peril, and maybe even, for some, the sword. This imperative is saying – God, give us the power to endure, to thrive, to not fail the test, but be equal to the challenges facing the struggle for the kingdom that is coming.

Simple, right? The structure is pretty simple. The implications of such a prayer are radical and even revolutionary. To pray for God’s kingdom is perhaps the most radical part of this prayer, for us and for the world. As we utter these words, we are being drawn into the work of the kingdom. We are being incorporated into the very life and work of God. That’s why Karl Barth (1886-1968) could say, “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

And then Jesus says, keep doing it over and over and over again. Never give up. If parents who are evil (Lk 11:13) – as Jesus says – can still give good things to their children, then how much more will God, who is not evil, be more parent-like in providing for the needs of God’s children? By calling parents evil and then comparing them to God’s benevolence might sound hard, but this is actually a rabbinic and Greek rhetoric device (*qal wehomer*, meaning “from the lesser to the greater”), comparing from less to more, with an emphasis on the more. In this case, the emphasis is on the nature of God. The point here is: there’s no malice or trickery in God. There’s no deception. God’s trustworthy; worthy of our trust, the one we can trust with the worth of our lives, our hearts, and passions. And the more we pray, the more we realize who God really is.

That’s why we are told to ask, to seek, to knock again and again – to request, to search, to hunt, to pound on heaven’s door demanding of God these very things. Biblical scholar Walter Wink says, “Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an outdoor bazaar than the polite monologues of the churches.”^[6]

That’s why Jesus tells us to ask, to seek, to knock, go after the very things that God wants. It’s about struggle, wrestling with God, over and over again, engaging God in a profoundly personal, passionate, potentially transforming way. For what we *ask* for –if we ask, not for anything we might desire, but to ask for these things – such as the kingdom, forgiveness, daily bread – they will be given. For the kingdom has come and is on its way. What we *search* for – if we search after these things that matter most to God – we will indeed find. And when we *knock* away on a closed door, if that door is the threshold into the wider kingdom of God – it will open. And it’s clear that God wants us to ask, and search, and bang away at prayer. Gregory the Great (540-604) once said, “God wishes to be asked, he wishes to be forced, he wishes, in a certain manner, to be overcome by our prayers.” For the more we ask, and the more we search after and pound away at the things that matter most, if we strive after these things the more we will find ourselves being changed, the more we will find the content of our prayer changing, the dimensions of our hearts changing, the choices we make changing, the things that matter most to us changing, the things that we hope for changing.

Maybe this is why prayer mattered so much in Jesus’ ministry and why we all need to be schooled in it. The fear and resistance are great because at some level we know that to take the Lord’s Prayer seriously, to take prayer seriously means at some level we will be changed, the

world will be changed. This scares us. Yet, the more we pray this way, as Jesus' prayed – asking, seeking, knocking – the more our lives might actually reflect the glory, the love, the justice, and the forgiveness of God.

^[1] I'm thinking here of John Wilkinson's best-seller, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to a Blessed Life* (Multnomah Press, 2004). For a wide and wild sample of the variety of books on prayer available, just type in "prayer" using the search engine at Amazon.com.

^[2] John Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer: Boldness and Blessing in the Name of Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 40.

^[3] Dan Clendenin, Journey with Jesus, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20100719JJ.shtml>

^[4] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 177-178.

^[5] William Wan, *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2009.

^[6] Walter Wink quoted in Richard J. Foster, *Finding the Heart's True Home* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 247.