

Prayer and Persistence
Psalm 138 Luke 11:1-13
July 28, 2019

How did you learn how to pray? Maybe it was your parents who taught you, reminding you to say thank you to God before you fell asleep, for everything that happened during the day? Maybe it was your grandfather, who prayed before you were allowed to eat any of the delicious food that was on the dinner table? Some of us learned to pray in church or Sunday school. Some of us learned to pray because it was the only thing we could think of doing when life got difficult. In this morning's reading, Jesus is praying, and as soon as he is done the disciples ask him to teach them how to pray. I am guessing that they saw how his prayers affected Jesus. They noticed how he often spent time in prayer when he faced challenges, or when he had spent all day giving of himself to others. Maybe they noticed how prayer seemed to calm Jesus down when he was getting edgy, or when he felt overwhelmed by the crowds that kept following him, wanting more from him – more healing, more teaching.

If nothing else, prayer is a great coping mechanism. Maybe you have found this to be true in your own life? Maybe you have found prayer to be useful as a way of keeping you on an even keel, helping you deal with the challenges that come your way? I know I have. In difficult situations, instead of reacting, first you take a moment to pray, inviting God into the situation. When we pray, we ask God to calm us down and to help us see a way through whatever problem we might be dealing with. Prayer is a wonderful reminder that, no matter what else might be true about our lives, God is always with us. I imagine that this was of paramount importance to Jesus. He spoke so lovingly about his father in heaven, calling him Daddy, and turning to him for so many things. The scriptures often mention that Jesus was praying. Many times he went away from the crowds, and even apart from his disciples, to be alone with God, so in Jesus' experience there must have been something life giving about prayer, perhaps even something essential.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, and Jesus obliged by giving them the guidelines that we have come to know of as the Lord's Prayer. The outline of the Lord's Prayer is pretty simple: offer gratitude and honor to God, our heavenly father. Affirm our trust that God is taking care of all of our needs – for the food we eat each day as well taking care of the future so we can stop worrying about it. Ask forgiveness for the ways in which we have fallen short of God's will for us, recognizing that first we have to forgive those who have hurt us. Finally, ask that God not test us, because we know that our faith is weak, and without God's support, we will falter and fail.

I find it interesting that this teaching on prayer is immediately followed by one of Jesus' parables. It's a parable about persistence, most likely it is about being persistent, or shameless when it comes to our prayers. This whole idea, of praying so intensely, can feel uncomfortable to us. I sometimes feel like I don't want to bother God with my requests because I don't want to be a pest. If there is something I need, I might pray once, in kind of a light way, without much power behind it, about what I am hoping for, but I don't like to push it. It is almost as if I treat God as I would treat a new acquaintance. With a new friend, I don't want to ask too much, just in case they are not as invested in our relationship as I am. But we are talking about God here, not about a human being with their own insecurities, and with God the most important thing for us to do is to be honest. We need to speak our truth, to ask for what we need; to be truthful about what scares us and ask God to help us out without any sense of shame or embarrassment. What Jesus is attempting to do in this parable, is to tell us that we cannot scare God off. No matter how persistent in asking for what we or a

loved one needs, no matter how annoying we might think we are, God will not be offended. God will not close the door on us. Jesus says, *“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”* To drive his point home, Jesus asks his listeners to consider how they might respond to their own children; *“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?”* The expected response, boiling up from the crowd, is an offended, “Of course not!” Most parents care about their children and want to give them what they need so that they can thrive. Of course, whenever we get into this kind of language, using our human parents as examples of how God might respond to us, we need to acknowledge that not everyone has parents who fit this mold. Many of us grew up with parents who did not know how to love us or care for us properly, and so we have to look a little harder for an illustration of just how compassionate and responsive to our prayers and our needs God really is.

When someone says that they don't trust God, or that God has not been there for them, it makes me think that it is the *people* in their lives who have failed them because we human beings have not been faithful in representing God to them. We are not nearly as good at following through as God is. The response Jesus gives is a pretty good wake up call. He says, *“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!”* I don't want to think of myself as evil, and for the most part I don't think we are, at least not intentionally, and yet the truth is that we *do* fail one another, and we fail God as well. On the scale from good to evil, no matter how hard we try to be good, we are still far from scoring anywhere near the perfect goodness of God. We just cannot measure up to God's goodness, no matter how much we try. And so Jesus' comment that even we so-called evil folks know how to care for a child with love and compassion, giving them what they really need, is meant to point out just how loving and compassionate God is. It reminds us of our better nature as well, and gives us some encouragement along this life journey to keep doing our best.

We sometimes get frustrated, assuming that God has forgotten us, that God doesn't care because we haven't received an answer to our prayer, or at least not the answer we are looking for. I don't really have a response to this. I don't know why all of our prayers don't get answered right away, or why they get answered in ways that sometimes go against what we might be hoping for. Loved ones die. People lose their jobs. Addictions take their toll. Families break apart. Our prayers don't always get the results we want, and yet I believe it is important that we keep on praying anyway. We need to be persistent in prayer, not just because we want some particular outcome, but because when we are persistently in prayer, it helps us hold our center, just as it must have helped Jesus so many times during his lifetime. Prayer helps us stay close to God when life is difficult, when problems threaten us and when we feel lost or alone.

The shameless persistence of the man who wanted bread to serve his unexpected company is a reminder to us that we should never give up. Even when it seems useless, even when we feel hopeless, we should never give up because prayer is not something we *say* as much as it is a part of who we *are*. We can live in such a way that our lives *themselves* are the prayer, that *we* become the prayer, and that everything we do is simply prayer in action. When prayer is woven into our lives like this, then we are always close to God. God is always with us, persistently and shamelessly loving us.

Loving God, we are grateful that you are here with us always. You hold us when we feel lonely. You bring healing when we are broken. You bring comfort when we are hurting. Help us to seek you out every day. May we come to you in prayers both formal and informal. Help us to know your presence in all we do. Amen.