

PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER Sermon for 7/24

By Rev. Dr. Donald Algeo

Genesis 18: 20-32

Psalm 138

Colossians 2: 6-19

Luke 11: 1-13

We all know the old story of the tourist wandering around the streets of Manhattan who stops a stranger and asks how you get to Carnegie Hall, and the stranger answers

There are other possible punch lines for the joke that are in the same ballpark as the one we're familiar with. How do you get to Carnegie Hall? the tourist might have said, and the stranger might have answered: Play the cello like Yo Yo Ma, or play the piano like Van Clyburn, and those answers would have been sort of true, and true in the same sort of way that "practice, practice, practice" is true. But they wouldn't have been funny and they wouldn't have been catchy. Why not? What's the difference?

Pretty clearly it's because the answer 'practice, practice, practice' reflects a reality that speaks to our lives at a more fundamental level than the simple aspiration to appear on a stage in front of a bunch of music aficionados. The tourist asks for a specific thing, and the stranger gives a general direction about the importance of persistence and discipline and work, and since that is not at all what we were expecting, to learn some life lesson that applies even to us, it catches us off-guard and makes us laugh and maybe even nod our heads.

In our Gospel passage from Luke for this morning, we find Jesus responding to a request one of his disciples made of him: "Lord, teach us to pray." In response, Christ gives a variation of what we call the Lord's Prayer, although it's somewhat shorter than the version we find in the sixth chapter of Matthew, the version that we recite in church. And then Christ goes on to say a good deal more about prayer than perhaps the disciple had been expecting, just as the stranger did who was responding to the tourist. And similarly, what Christ has to say about prayer speaks to its importance at a much deeper level of

our reality. And I even think - if I may say this with reverence - that the stranger's answer might have served Christ's purpose. "Lord, how should we pray?"

"Practice, practice, practice."

After he gives a few examples of what to pray for, Jesus expands His teaching by asking us to imagine someone who has received an unexpected late-night visitor, and is embarrassed to realize that he has no bread to offer. So he hurries to his neighbor's house and pounds on the door. The neighbor inside listens to his sad story but refuses to get up to help him out because he's already settled into bed. Luke doesn't flesh out the story here, but it's clear that the fellow at the door doesn't take 'No' for an answer, but instead keeps on knocking and pleading for help. That part must have been left out of the story because of the lesson Christ draws from it: "I tell you that even if he will not get up and give you the bread because you are his friend, yet he will get up and give you everything you need because you are not ashamed to keep on asking." (v.8)

Now, is what Jesus is teaching his disciples and us here simply that it's important that we keep bringing up the same request to God? So for example, if we want a promotion, that we should ask for it over and over and over, and that eventually God will get so tired of listening to us that he'll grant the promotion? Is that the advantage of persistence in prayer that Christ is explaining to us, that we should tire God out until He bends to our will, the same way we might tire out our supervisor on the job?

When I ask the question that way, the answer is obviously 'No.' God is not like your supervisor on the job in this respect, and He does not do things because He is tired out, by you or anyone else. That is clearly not what Jesus is talking about in this illustration.

Let me add as an aside that this isn't to deny that being persistent in asking for a particular thing might be a quality that God wants to see us demonstrate, for our own sake, certainly, if not for His. My own term for the category of prayer in which I think persistence of this sort might have a 'payoff' is a category I call the "luxury goods" category. What I mean by that are selfish prayers for things that you really don't need, but that you would enjoy: "luxury goods," in other words. There is nothing amiss in praying for such things, in my opinion, although I do think they should be offered towards the end of your prayer time. And I think that your persistence in pressing those particular kinds of requests is something God probably factors in to His determination,

the way a parent might factor into her decision concerning her child's request for a new bicycle, say, the child's expression over time of that desire. That it's not just a passing fancy could be an important, if not decisive, factor in the mother's decision.

But returning to our main argument, I think that Christ in this passage is teaching us something much deeper about the nature of prayer, and the importance of persistence in its practice.

He follows up his story about the neighbor pleading for bread with this general instruction: "Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks will receive, and he who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to everyone who knocks."(9,10)

You'll notice what a straightforward promise this is. Often when you hear this passage or others like it discussed, you'll hear the pastor or teacher try to bring it into accord with common sense. And since common sense obviously informs us that prayer often does not result in people receiving what they prayed for, they venture to soften the offense to our common sense by informing us what Christ meant to say, or by adding qualifications that Christ left out.

And that's fine, there can be value in reading Scripture that way. But I prefer to stay with what Christ actually said, and see what we can make of that. After all, if Christ and common sense always came to the same conclusions, there would have been no need for Christ to teach us anything.

So to repeat, what stands out about the moral Christ draws from his little story about the man and his neighbor is how stark and dramatic it is, almost dumbfoundingly so. There are no qualifications. Christ doesn't say: Ask for the right thing and you will receive. Seek for things of value and you will find them. Knock on the door of a welcoming church, and it will be opened to you.

No, in the context of prayer, Christ is hammering home the point that there is a certain positive benefit to prayer, one that is guaranteed, one that results from prayer as surely as day results from night.

What could that be?

And as if to heighten the mystery, Our Lord immediately asks a pair of rhetorical questions. "Would any of you who are fathers give your son a snake

when he asks for fish? Or would you give him a scorpion when he asks for an egg?"(11-12)

Again, this is by many interpreters taken as Christ describing God's procedure as something like this: God hears all the requests coming up to him and sifts through them all, tossing out the bad ones, the ones that aren't good for you, and granting the good ones, the ones that are good for you, or perhaps even making a substitution if we happen to ask for the wrong thing.

But you notice how we have now left the subject of persistence? Now we are talking about how the benefit of prayers depends on how God reacts to it, on His evaluation of whether or not it's good for us. Ask God for a fish and he's not going to give you a snake, for goodness sake!

But, that's not what we were talking about. That has nothing to do with the man knocking late at night on his neighbor's door, asking for bread.

I think the problem here, as it is so often, is that we are trying to make Christ's thinking conform to our own, rather than the other way around.

Christ offers to teach us about prayer, and we think, O excellent. Now I will learn how to get the things I want. As if the main point of prayer is to get things, as the main point in the world of asking is to get things.

But the point of prayer, as Jesus teaches it, is not merely asking, but also seeking, and knocking. Or in other words, prayer is the engagement with God we are to bring to all aspects of life in which we require support and guidance and opportunity and reward from the spiritual realm. Or in other words, in all aspects of life that make life more than merely animalistic.

And that, I think, is why Jesus concludes his lesson the way he does: "As bad as you are you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him."

What Christ is looking for in his followers is a persistent attitude of prayer. That does not mean an attitude of always asking for things, or asking for them over and over. It means an attitude of openness to God's ever-present availability, to God's unfailing and limitless concern, and to God's power to respond to our needs.

That attitude is not natural. The natural attitude is to trust in the world, or in luck, or in ourselves. The opposing attitude - we can also call it faith - of such constant turning to and consultation with God is something that can and must be nurtured. How is it nurtured? The suggestion I'm pursuing here is that it is nurtured in prayer.

Let's think about our prayer time. Not the time we spend during the service on Sunday, but the specific time we set aside to spend alone with God. What is it like?

Well, first and foremost, it's the time we remove our attention from the world and at least try to focus on God. Even when our minds wander - as mine is prone to do - at least we are aware that our attention is wandering from something. At least in theory, that's why we are here, alone, removed to the extent possible from distraction: to talk with God.

And honestly, that's all God needs, to do His work. An opening. Faith, as small as a mustard seed.

We tend to think of our prayer time as the time during which we communicate to God the ways in which we would like Him to change the world. But I suggest to you that, from God's point of view, it is the time we are offering Him to make the necessary changes in us.

The very fact of our praying is an acknowledgment of the three elements of the attitude of openness to God, of openness to His availability, to His concern, and to His power. It is when we are surrendered to that openness that God can do His work on us. The piano student will flourish most when she has an attitude of focused trust in her piano teacher. That's when the miracle of true instruction can happen.

The message of Christ's parable is not to keep pestering God. The message is to persist, under any and all circumstances, in making the development of one's relationship with God the activity of highest priority in one's daily routine. Whatever the response to our specific requests and perceived needs, even when the world wraps us around with difficulties and it seems as if God is not listening, even when we plead for an understanding of God or a glimpse of God's face and receive only silence and experience only feelings of abandonment and isolation, even then - maybe especially then - Christ's message is to persist in prayer.

Being a person of prayer and being a person of faith are the same thing. That's why Jesus concluded another parable the way he did.

We find this parable in Luke's eighteenth chapter, and Luke explicitly tells us that the parable is about persistence in prayer. "The Jesus told his disciples a parable to teach them that they should always pray and never be discouraged."

The parable is the familiar one about the persistent widow who keeps bringing her case back in front of a cynical judge until the judge finally rules in her favor just to get her off his back. You can see how similar the story is to that of the neighbor who keeps knocking on the door. But let me read you the concluding verses:

And the Lord continued, "Listen to what the corrupt judge said. Now, will God not judge in favor of His own people who cry to him day and night for help? Will he be slow to help them? I tell you, he will judge in their favor and do it quickly. But will the Son of Man find faith on earth when he comes?" (18:6-8)

And that I think is what Christ is guaranteeing to the person engaged in persistent prayer. The central value of prayer is independent of how and whether the world is changed in response to it. The true and certain and immediate reward that comes from making prayer the central and ever increasing element of one's life is that it both nurtures and is the growth of faith in one's life. And what is the growth of faith? It is the growing intimacy of our relationship with God, and the growing awareness, an awareness that derives from that intimacy, of God's limitless glory, and of the unfathomable grace that allows us to share in that glory through the sacrifice of God's own child, Jesus Christ.

And so, Gracious God, let us borrow for our prayer this morning the words of the great nineteenth century writer, George MacDonald. Lord, grant us:

To trust in spite of the look of being forsaken; to keep crying out into the vast, whence comes no returning voice, and where seems no hearing; to see the machinery of the world pauselessly grinding on as if self-moved, caring for no life, nor shifting a hairbreadth for all entreaty, and yet believe that God is awake and utterly loving; to desire nothing but what comes meant for us from His hand; to wait patiently, ready to die of hunger, fearing only lest faith should fail--such is the victory that overcometh the world, such is faith indeed