

Persistent Prayer

8th Sunday after Pentecost – July 25, 2004
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”² He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

⁵And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’

⁷And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸I 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.

⁹“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?

¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If 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!”

Today, the Lectionary takes us to Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer and Jesus’ teachings about persistent (even pushy!) prayer.

One of the surprising joys of parenthood is how much we can learn from our children. Through them, we see the most everyday activities as new wonders. Through them, we can learn to shed some of our anxieties and enjoy the moment. Through them, we can learn the value of being pushy!

How many of us have not endured a child’s relentless . . . “please, please, can I, can I.” They simply don’t give up. Admittedly, it doesn’t take long for their persistence to become annoying. But perhaps also, their persistence reflects their unshakeable faith in our love and our ability to satisfy their every desire . . . they know we won’t give them a snake when they ask for a fish.

The Life of Prayer¹

“So often people come to see me and ask me to teach them how to approach a life of prayer; and when I ask them, “Do you *believe* in God? Is there within your experience a living God to whom you could address the words of your prayer, towards whom you could turn your heart, whom you could invoke – that is, to call to come and dwell within you?” So often the answer is, “No, I do not have such a God, I believe in a first cause of the universe. I believe that there must be, beyond or in the depth of things, a power that gives them existence and shape. I believe, with fear, that one day I will be answerable for my life to a Being whom I do not even know now.” And at this point I always say, “Do not try to pray. Ask yourself more questions, because praying is like speaking to a friend. One does not speak to an imaginary friend beneficially. One can speak usefully only to a friend who is real, to someone to whom we can open our hearts, who is listening, before whose judgment we stand, and who will stand by us whether we are in the right or in the wrong.

So this is the question that I would like to ask, time and again, of myself, and now of you. When you go around in silence, when you pray, ask yourself: “Is there in my experience a living God, as concrete, as real as my friends, my relatives, some *one* and not some *thing*, not a power, but a real person?”

1. This is from an essay, “The Life of Prayer,” by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, who, until his recent death, was the long-time head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain. The essay is from the April 2004 special issue of *Theology Today* on Orthodoxy. The entire issue is still available on-line at www.theologytoday.ptsem.edu, though it probably won’t be there much longer.

I find the NRSV translation of Jesus' parable about the friend at the door to be pretty confusing. Here is Peterson's rendering of the parable (from *The Message*):

Then he said, "Imagine what would happen if you went to a friend in the middle of the night and said, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread. An old friend traveling through just showed up, and I don't have a thing on hand.'

"The friend answers from his bed, 'Don't bother me. The door's locked; my children are all down for the night; I can't get up to give you anything.'

"But let me tell you, even if he won't get up because he's a friend, if you stand your ground, knocking and waking all the neighbors, he'll finally get up and get you whatever you need."

God as a sleepy friend? That is quite an image. What is Jesus' point here? Could he mean that we need to awaken God or that God will hear us only if we pound on the door long enough? Of course not. The inevitability of the sleepy friend's answer is part of the point. Of course God answers; that is not the problem. The problem doesn't lie with God, it lies with you and me. We are the ones who try to find ways to squeeze prayer into our busy schedule. We are the ones who, like the "praying mantis," pray only when we feel like it. We are the ones who get frustrated when we think that God isn't answering us (usually meaning, God isn't giving us what we think we want.)

Jesus knows how easy it is for us to simply give up, how easy it is for our prayer lives to get shoved aside. In telling the parable, Jesus is teaching us that our prayer life requires dogged and persistent discipline. It isn't about knocking loudly enough to wake God up; it is about the ease with which we slink away from the door. Jesus' message is simple: Stick With It! Ask and it will be given. Seek and we'll find. Knock and the door will be opened. When the friend arrives at the door, he knows with certainty that, eventually, the door will be opened and he will be handed the bread he needs.



Why don't we "Stick with it"?

Why do so many of us find it difficult to pray with confident persistence? I believe that for many Christians, God just doesn't seem real enough. Metropolitan¹ Bloom urges us to ask the right question of ourselves: "Is there in my experience a living God, as concrete, as real as my friends, my relatives, some-one and not some-thing, not a power, but a real person?"

It is a pretty straightforward thing for me to sit down with my brother and seek his help and understanding. I can see him. I can

touch him. I can hear him. But coming to God requires a deeper understanding of reality. I must trust in things that are unseen and cannot be touched. For the ancients, this may not have been as difficult as it is for us moderns. Such trust is not what comes naturally to us. We have trouble truly trusting that God is every bit as real as our friends and relatives. Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, he is a person in the present. We don't simply learn *about* Jesus, we learn *from* him. It is easy for us to give a quick nod of the head to such claims, but we must learn to embrace them.

When I come to God, I am coming to someone as real and as concrete as my brother. When I come to God, I am coming to someone who loves me, who desires only the best for me, whom I can trust completely, who won't ever tire of listening to me. God is the essence of our lives; how can we not persist in our prayer?

¹"Metropolitan" is a title used in Orthodox churches to denote an ecclesiastical office similar to that of Bishop. Thus, if we think of Metropolitan Bloom as Bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain, we won't be far wrong.

Daily Bible Readings

(all the other Lectionary readings for today and a few more)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 85 A prayer for the restoration of God's favor</p>	<p>Day 2 Hosea 1:2-10 God calls Hosea (Hosea must be faithful to Gomer, a prostitute, just as God is faithful to his people, who insist on chasing after other gods.)</p>
<p>Day 3 Hosea 11:1-12:1 (not from today's Lectionary readings) This passage is a poignant and poetic depiction of God's compassion for his ungrateful people.</p>	<p>Day 4 Colossians 2:6-19 The fullness of life in Christ</p>
<p>Day 5 Psalm 62 Trust in God at all times. God will not let us down.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Archived Sermon Background Studies

www.standrewccl.org

Today's Sermon Background Study is the 104th that I've written. All of the studies are available on-line at the website of the St. Andrew Center for Christian Learning: www.standrewccl.org. The listings are organized by date/series and include the title of the study and the scripture passages. Thus, using the "Find" tool in your web-browser, you could, for example, look up all the studies that are based upon a passage from Luke or from Genesis. I post the studies on-line at least a week before the sermon. For example, the August 1 study is available now.

The seventh "Fruit of the Spirit" evening lecture, *Faithfulness*, will be this Tuesday, July 27, at 7pm in Piro Hall with Cecil Taylor.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by making a list of reasons for our lack of persistence in our prayer lives. In the study, I concentrated on our difficulty in truly embracing the reality of God, in understanding that God is every bit as real as our brother or sister. What other explanations help to account for our lack of persistence? Then you might discuss how we can overcome these challenges. Do you think this is more about tips and techniques or a change of heart and mind? Why? What are the implications of your answer?
2. The Lord's Prayer that we pray each week in worship is based upon the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew's Gospel (6:9-13). Today's scripture passage is from Luke and presents Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. Luke's version lacks the following portions of Matthew's: (Our . . . who art in heaven . . . Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . . but deliver us from evil.)" Luke's prayer focuses on our attention on its simplicity and directness. Both versions begin by addressing God as "Father." Here, Jesus is explicitly teaching his disciples (that includes us!) that we are to address God as Jesus addressed God. We are so used to hearing this, that we've lost any sense of how shocking it really is. We are to address God, to pray to God, the creator of the universe, as we would address a loving father. Indeed, it is God-as-Father that makes all the rest of the prayer possible. How does understanding God to be a loving father shape our prayer lives? [Here are some questions that ought to generate discussion: How can we address God as Father without implying that God has gender? Why do we address God as Father and not as Mother? What do we really mean when we speak of God as Father?]