

“HOW PERSISTENT ARE YOU?”

Luke 11:1-13

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A five year-old girl said grace at the family dinner table one night. “Dear God,” she said. “Thank you for these pancakes.” When she concluded, her parents asked why she thanked God for pancakes when they were having chicken for supper. She smiled and said, “I thought I’d see if God was paying attention!”

A friend of mine’s son prayed so quietly at dinner that the rest of the family couldn’t hear what he was saying. When his sister complained to him about it, he said, “I wasn’t praying to you!”

Then there was the little child who prayed, “Dear God. I don’t think anybody could be a better God than you. I just want you to know that. I am not just saying that because you are already God!”

My favorite story about children and prayer is the one about the little boy who had said his prayers and was already tucked in for the night. All of a sudden little Johnny was in his parents’ bedroom door shouting, “Mommy! Daddy! There’s a lion outside!” “There’s no lion outside,” said his father, weary of the boy’s active imagination. “Now go back to bed and get to sleep.”

Little Johnny did as he was told, but it wasn’t long until he was back in his parents’ room with the same story, “Mommy! Daddy! There’s a lion outside.” Again his parents scolded him for getting out of bed, and sent him back to his room.

A third time Johnny appeared, still worked up, with the report, “That lion is still out there!” In order to attempt to calm little Johnny down, and in order to put an end to this nonsense, Johnny’s dad decided to get up and take a look for himself. When he looked out Johnny’s bedroom window, he saw what Johnny was talking about. There in the middle of the backyard was a large, stray dog that had wandered into the yard. “Johnny, that’s not a lion. That is just a dog, and he won’t hurt you. Now go back to bed. And before you go to sleep, you need to say a prayer and ask God to forgive you for telling your parents something that is not true.”

Johnny went solemnly and remorsefully back to bed. But a few minutes later, he appeared in his parents’ bedroom one more time. “I did as you said, Daddy. I asked God to forgive me. And he said, ‘It’s all right, Johnny. The first time I saw that dog I thought he was a lion, too!’”

Do you remember when God was that real to you and prayer was that natural? At times, at church meetings I will ask someone to pray, and sometimes that causes the person to panic. My intention is not to make anyone feel uncomfortable. Of course, there are types of prayer and formulas for prayer, but the definition we learned as children is still the best: **“Prayer is talking with God.”** Just as we would talk with any friend, so God expects to hear from us. Our prayers do not have to be eloquent or even well thought out. All we need to do is come to God with the deepest yearnings of our hearts. God welcomes that. God looks forward to that.

When the disciples saw Jesus praying in a certain place, they said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.” What follows is Luke’s version of what we commonly refer to as “The Lord’s Prayer,” followed by a couple stories and illustrations told by Jesus to underscore the need for persistent prayer. Here Jesus gives his disciples a prayer to pray, and some elements of a prayerful life that are essential for anyone who seeks to live meditatively and prayerfully.

According to Jesus, to pray is to live in a continual intimate relationship with God. Sometimes people ask what subjects are appropriate to bring to God in prayer. True prayer is about everything; it is about envisioning a world where things are as they ought to be. To pray is to live in the assurance that God has made a world that will sustain us. True prayer requires us to live in harmony with all. True prayer is in harmony with the earth where we can hope and work for a world free of evil.

However, a centered life of prayer and meditation will not be easy, as most of us are well aware. The story of the friend who comes at midnight reminds us that following Jesus is not always convenient or predictable. A friend of mine asked a seminary dean what he thought was the most important virtue that pastors need to cultivate. **“Dogged persistence,”** he replied.

I think he was on to something. Recently a fellow pastor called me, discouraged and depressed. It was not that things were going badly for her and her congregation. People were not upset with her. It’s just that people were not responding and getting involved as she hoped they would. As a pastor, my complaint is not that people don’t care or that people are not motivated to do God’s work. The toughest problem in leading a congregation is that God’s work can be so difficult that it is tough to keep at it, especially when we don’t get immediate results.

We start out committed, excited about the opportunity to witness, to have a part in God’s kingdom, to work with Jesus in changing the world. But eventually many of us, pastors included, (pastors especially!), get weary, and eventually we are tempted to give up. Sometimes we keep going through the motions, but we quit expecting that anything will happen and that any real change will take place. We sometimes get so discouraged we can’t see the possibilities for growth and change that are all around us.

So Jesus tells a parable about prayer. Jesus says that the most important quality in prayer is **persistence**, the grace just to keep at it. We are to be persistent in God’s work, even when it is not easy, because God has been persistent with us. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray by giving them a model prayer, “The Lord’s Prayer.” Then he tells them a parable about prayer. The point of the parable, I repeat, is that we are to be persistent in prayer. We need to keep at it.

Jesus’ exhortation to be persistent needs to be set in the context of Jesus’ whole message. Jesus embodied the persistent love of God. Jesus preached and taught, and in his life exemplified the God who keeps coming back to us, the God who keeps interrupting us, the God who keeps blessing us, even when we attempt to turn away. Even when we are ready to throw in the towel and quit, God continues to love us and care for us. God never gives up!

Francis Thompson had been a derelict and a drunk. In his immortal poem, “The Hound of Heaven,” Thompson compares the persistent love of God to the faithful persistence of his pet dog. “I fled him down the nights and down the days, I fled him through the darkness of the years, I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind, but still he followed, followed after. . . .” “God would not give up,” writes Thompson, “Until at long last, I yielded myself to him.”

We are called to be persistent in prayer, because we have a God who is persistent with us! We can’t give up on the world, because God in Christ has not given up on us. We don’t lose heart in our attempts to pray and to serve God, because God doesn’t lose patience with us. God loves us with a love that is eternal. God never gives up on his creation. We shouldn’t either.

When we get discouraged; when we feel that we aren’t making any progress or don’t have much to show for our efforts, we need to be reminded that God is still in control of our world. We are called simply to be faithful, and to leave the results to God!

Martin Luther King, who had every right to be discouraged in his long crusade for social justice, reminded those who were involved in the civil rights movement that in spite of much evidence to the contrary, God is still in control of the universe. We need to remember that. We have a future, because God’s drama with us continues. He is faithful. God will see us through.

“At times we need to know,” King wrote, “That the Lord is a God of justice. When slumbering giants of injustice emerge in the earth, we need to know that there is a God of power who can cut them down like the grass and leave them withering like the green herb. When our most tireless efforts fail to stop the surging sweep of oppression, we need to know that in this universe is a God whose matchless strength is a fit contrast to the sordid weakness of humanity. . . . When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment, and when through our folly and sin we stray into some destructive far country and are frustrated because of a strange feeling of homesickness, we need to know that there is someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance. When days grow dark and nights grow dreary, we can be thankful that our God combines in his nature a creative synthesis of love and justice that will lead us through life’s dark valleys and into sunlit pathways of hope and fulfillment.”(1) And so we are called to be persistent, knowing that God is in control and that God will see us through whatever challenges we are facing.

Jesus’ story of the persistent friend who badgers his neighbor highlights the need for stamina in our spiritual lives. Jesus’ point is not that we can “wear God down” --- the way the parent of a seven-year-old might give a child a quarter for the gumball machine simply to shut him up. Rather, Jesus’ parable involves the rabbinic analogy of “how much more.” If the persistent friend’s groggy neighbor reluctantly gives what is requested, **how much more** will the one who watches over Israel, neither slumbering nor sleeping, (Psalm 121:4) readily give what God’s people ask.

In the saying that follows, Jesus continues this theme of “**how much more.**” If fallen, sinful human parents nevertheless can give good things to their children, **how much more** will the holy and perfect heavenly Father give --- not just good things --- but the Holy Spirit to those who ask. God offers his guiding, indwelling, sustaining, empowering presence to those who ask for it. People sometimes express concern to me about unanswered prayer. Jesus might ask, “Have you requested what God so zealously desires to give?”

Be careful what you pray for! God promises the Holy Spirit to those who ask, search and knock on God’s door. Are you ready for that? The Holy Spirit is the power of God. It is yours for the asking. But it will require persistence in order to follow where God is leading.

Persistence in prayer. Persistence in faith. Persistence in the spiritual life. God is challenging us to stick with it, assuring us that he will stick with us, every step of the way.

Prayer: Dear God, how soon we get discouraged! How quickly we are ready to throw in the towel. Help us to be more persistent in prayer. Help us to be more persistent in faith. Help us to be more persistent in our spiritual lives, knowing that you are with us and will stay with us, every step of the way. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Note:

1. King, Martin Luther, Jr. Quoted in Pulpit Resource. Vol. 35. No. 3., p. 24.

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