

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Darryl Thompson Powell

July 24th, 2016

I want to put a tag on our gospel text and for a moment, with your prayers, I want to talk about “Shameless Prayer.”

Last week I finally got around to watching the movie Zootopia. As I watched it, I couldn't help think that it reflected the racial tension and political fears of our country today. I mentioned that to some friends and one of them said, “Yep. That's why we really need to pray.” Another friend replied, “I've been praying. For over a year I've been praying that the police would stop shooting unarmed Black men, and look at how that turned out. God doesn't want to answer my prayers.”

Like my friend, sometimes we can feel impatient with God because it seems God is late answering our requests or meeting our needs. At some point in our lives, every Christian has questions concerning prayer. We wonder why we continue to pray for something if we've already prayed and we believe God will answer. Or there are the times when we pray – confident that it is God's will and certain of an answer – yet nothing happens.

In our gospel text, the disciples ask “Lord teach us to pray.” Jesus gives them a prayer that we referred to as “The Lord's Prayer.” For many Christians today, it's just

something that you recite. But this prayer was more than just a prayer to be repeated. This prayer was to be a blueprint of all prayers that would be acceptable to God. It's not wrong to recite the prayer; it's more important to understand its principles. So after giving the disciples a pattern for prayer, Jesus continues this teachable moment by telling a story illuminate three principles about prayer.

First, in verses 5-8 Jesus shows us we are to **pray shamelessly**.

Let me back up for a second. To truly understand this parable, we must understand a few things about first century culture. Most importantly, food wasn't readily available as it is today. There were no 24-hour Jewels or 7-11s. They didn't have refrigerators so bread was baked each day for the needs of that day.

We also must understand that hospitality was held in high regard and was seen almost as a duty, especially by Jewish people. Visitors were welcomed and cared for no matter what time they arrived. In order to avoid the intense midday heat – like what we've had this week, only hotter – people often traveled in the evening. Travelers arriving near midnight wasn't uncommon. So here's the dilemma: the unprepared host has a guest arriving late who is hungry and it's his duty as host to provide a meal. But he has no bread. Not providing for his guest's needs would bring shame upon him, his family and the whole village. This man can't supply the need himself but he knows of

another who can. So he goes to his friend's house regardless of the lateness of the hour and to ask for his help.

Jesus is essentially asking his disciples, "which of you has the nerve to wake up your friend and their whole family in the middle of the night to ask for bread?" This tension is clear in the friend's response: "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."

It's easy to understand this man's reluctance to help his friend out. If you've ever had to wrestle children into bed, you know why this man was unwilling to do anything that might wake the kids. This isn't a modern home with lots of rooms. The whole family slept in the same room and even the smaller livestock was brought into the house at night. To get up and meet this man's needs would have been very inconvenient. That's why the man on the inside refused the request at first. Friendship wasn't a sufficient reason to upset the whole household. Jesus is essentially saying to the disciples, "Can you imagine a friend who would react in such a way?" As much as many of them would like to say, "I'd do the same thing," since Jesus is asking they know he's expecting the opposite: "No of course not!" Eventually the reluctant friend got up and gave his neighbor what he needed for one reason only: the persistence of the person making the request.

Now I need to be clear here: Jesus isn't comparing God to a sleepy, selfish neighbor. Jesus is contrasting the two, telling the disciples that if a neighbor can on the basis of friendship and social etiquette be persuaded to meet the needs of a friend, think about how much more your father in heaven will meet the needs of God's children.

Let's be honest here: sometimes we think the reason our prayer wasn't answered like we thought is because we weren't persistent enough. We say at least to ourselves, "If only I had prayed more..." We've convinced ourselves that we must keep beating on God's door until we overcome God's unwillingness to act. And Bible thumpers will quote this text, especially verse 8 for the need of persistent prayer. But that's not what verse eight is teaching us about prayer. Understanding the Greek word ἀναίδειαν (anaideian) – which is translated as "persistence" in some translations and "importunity" in others – is essential to understanding what Jesus was trying to teach. It's the only time this word appears in the New Testament. It's a compound Greek word that literally means "without shame." A better translation would be "shamelessness."

Because of the use of pronouns, we can question which of these men is shameless. Some point to the neighbor who arose and gave his friend bread, saying that he did so without shame for waking up the whole household because it was for hospitality. The context and much preaching on this text suggests that "shamelessness" refers to the

man who came making the request. He was shameless in his pleading, continuing until his friend responded to his need.

I've often had problems with this because I couldn't understand what gives us the right to come boldly or shamelessly to God with our needs. Then I heard this story about a Roman emperor in his chariot as part of a parade after a victory. People were lined up along the streets cheering with guards stationed to keep the people back. The emperor's family and advisors sat on a platform to watch him go by in all his glory. As the emperor came near the platform, a young boy jumped off, burrowed through the crowd, and tried to dodge a guard so he could run to the emperor's chariot. The soldier stopped him and said, "You can't go near him." The boy laughed and said; "He may be your emperor but he's my father." Then he ran into his father's open arms.

There is the boy's bold shamelessness but then there's also the shamelessness of the emperor who breaks protocol to reach with his child. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that because Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of the father, we can come boldly and shamelessly before the throne of grace.<sup>i</sup> We have no need to fear because we are children of the king.

We are to pray shamelessly. Verses 9-10 remind us we're also to **pray passionately**.

In verse 9 we have three verbs: ask, search, knock. Each of these verbs are in the present imperative. For those of you who weren't English majors or studied Latin or Greek, let me break that down for you: Verbs in the present imperative aren't suggestions; they're commands. And in this sense, it means you don't do it just once: you keep doing it. So Jesus is commanding them to keep asking, keep searching, keep knocking.

Oh, but it goes deeper than that. There's a progression in this sequence. Ask. Search. Knock. Asking means making a simple request. Searching implies a stronger desire and a more defined request that takes time. Knocking shows determination to get an answer."

Jesus is saying that there are some situations that require more than merely asking for something. Searching isn't a simple act, it's a process, a series of acts. Knocking isn't a single rap on the door. It's a series of raps. It is a request for admission, repeated if necessary, and it suggest situations where we seek an entrance or an opportunity.

Then in verse ten we're told, those who ask, receive; those who search, find; and those who knock will have doors opened. The answer to each of the actions is in the present indicative tense. That means the person who's making the statement sees these things as fact, whether they happen in the past, present or future. In other words, Jesus

is saying that God not only hears our prayers but promises to answer each and every prayer, in God's time, to God's glory, and to our joy and amazement.

By continuing to ask, search, and knock, we get ourselves out of the bad habit of seeing prayer as an option or for emergency use only. We can't just come to God on Sunday mornings or when we have a midnight emergency. We need to keep an open line of communication with our Creator.

Sadly, too often we won't continue to ask if we don't really feel a need or if we believe we can do it on our own. A great example of persistently passionate prayer is George Müller. Müller and his wife started the Christian orphanage movement in England in the 1800's. He was a man of prayer. He knew the importance of keeping at a prayer even when the answer seemed to be delayed. When he was young he began to pray that two of his friends might become Christian. He prayed for them every day for more than sixty years. One of the men was converted shortly before his death at what was probably the last service that Müller held. The other was converted within a year of his death. We need to be like George Müller and pray and not give up.

But Jesus is talking about more than a repetition of the same request over and over again. As we keep on asking we are to keep on searching. And a part of this searching is trying to discover God's will. God cannot put things into our hands until our hearts

are prepared. Someone has said it this way, the greatest blessing of prayer is not just getting an answer but being the kind of person that God can trust with the answer.

We pray shamelessly, we pray passionately and – as verses 11 and 12 say – we **pray expectantly**.

God does answer prayer, and God's answers are always good ones. Because God is a good God, we can expect God to answer our prayers and answers them in a way that is for our highest good. I need you to see that Jesus doesn't say, "If you ask for a fish, God will give you a fish." Sometimes what we ask for isn't for our highest good. Jesus sums it all up in verse 13: "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!"

Let me put it like this: for those who have raised or cared for children, chances are you've worried about the answer that you give a child when they ask for something. "When I say yes and give them what they want, am I spoiling them? Or when I say no, was my denial selfish or shortsighted?" We do the best we can, but sometimes our best isn't good enough. But God doesn't have those limits. God never says "no" because God is distracted, exhausted or irritable. If God is saying "no," there's a good reason.

Sometimes God's answer is to give us a greater portion of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us that God loves for God's children to develop the habit of asking for our



creator's help. But God doesn't leave us trapped by our own limited perception of the situation. Instead, God sends the Holy Spirit to help us understand our needs and not just our wants. Paul puts it best in Romans 8: "...the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."<sup>ii</sup>

Sisters and brothers, God is eager to respond to God's children who shamelessly ask, passionately seek and expectantly knock at God's door with their needs and requests.

Writer C.S. Lewis reminds us of the challenge we face each day: "It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind."<sup>iii</sup> Grace L. Naessens put it this way in a poem titled "The Difference."

*I got up early one morning  
and rushed right into the day;  
I had so much to accomplish  
that I didn't have time to pray.  
Problems just tumbled about me,  
and heavier came each task.  
"Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered.  
He answered, "You didn't ask."  
I wanted to see joy and beauty,  
but the day toiled on, gray and bleak;  
I wondered why God didn't show me.  
He said, "But you didn't seek."  
I tried to come into God's presence;  
I used all my keys at the lock.  
God gently and lovingly chided,  
"My child, you didn't knock."  
I woke up early this morning,  
and paused before entering the day;  
I had so much to accomplish  
that I had to take time to pray.*

Sisters and brothers, God wants to have a relationship with each and every one of us. But to do that, we have to be open to shameless prayer each and every day. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Hebrews 4:16 (paraphrased)

<sup>ii</sup> Romans 8:26 (NRSV)

<sup>iii</sup> C.S. Lewis, **Mere Christianity**