

“Keep Knocking”

Neil Engle
July 29, 2007
Text: Luke 11:1-13

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

The disciples must have recognized how much prayer meant to Jesus, and feeling certain that it had much to do with the extraordinary power of His life, they wished to share in that meaning. So the scripture passage for this morning begins simply enough – “Lord, teach us to pray.” Now that’s not an unusual request; rabbis often formulated short prayers for the use of their followers. But it is interesting that until now, Jesus has not volunteered it. Perhaps His hesitancy stemmed from a conviction that prayer involved a great deal more than recitation of words.

Luke seems to reinforce that conviction by placing a parable immediately following his “short form” of the Lord’s Prayer. The parable is not a footnote to the Prayer. Rather, it is an essential expansion and completion of it. Luke has Jesus say, in effect, “Here are the words you should speak, but listen to this story. . . .” Notice that Jesus assumes His disciples pray. Jesus doesn’t use oughts and should, he doesn’t set forth the times and places for prayer. Rather, He assumes that prayer is part of the lives of His disciples.

To really understand this parable, we must first have an appreciation for what a first century Jewish home, all locked up for the night, was like. Animals were usually brought into this two-level “cottage” at sundown to keep them safe. The family usually slept on a raised platform to keep the livestock from wandering over them. The baby’s cot, an oven, a pan for holding hot coals, the sleeping mats at night – they were all here where cooking, eating, and sleeping took place. Midnight was considered extremely late, and if it was winter, the family would be covered with rugs, the coals would have gone out, and nobody would want to get up.

So it’s midnight, and suddenly there’s a hammering on the door. The man of the house grunts and pretends to ignore it. The knocking gets louder and the man rolls over with his back to the noise, pulls the rug up under his chin and mutters to himself. “Go away!” The person knocking on the door – this midnight intruder – doesn’t give up. He’s persistent, he’s guilty of importunity – of being relentless in his appeal, of pressing his case to the point of being obnoxious. He continues to pound on his neighbor’s door. The man of the house, still trying to ignore the noise, wakes up alarmed and outraged.

Who could it be at such an ungodly hour? He’s afraid to call out for fear of waking the baby; instead he tiptoes around his sleeping children, stumbles over the animals, and reaches the door. Outside he hears the pleading voice of a neighbor who needs bread to break with an unexpected guest. Now even though the rigid laws of Eastern hospitality demanded some sympathy, our man tells him to get lost. He threads his way back to bed and grumbles to his wife. “Can you imagine knocking at a man’s door at this hour of the night. ‘Give him bread,’ he says. Not me! He doesn’t deserve a thing for pounding on our door like that!” The man stops talking – the baby coughs, the animals stir. Husband and wife hold their breath. They’re ready to go back to sleep.

But not deterred by the discomfort he has already caused, the Friend outside is “shameless” enough to pound on the door again. A chicken squawks, a donkey squeals, the baby screams. “Do anything!” yells the wife, “but get rid of him!” The friend outside won’t give up. After Jesus finishes this parable, He urges His audience to be persistent in prayer. “Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you.” Jesus could well have said, simply, “Be persistent in prayer and God will answer.” But He knew that more theological truth is communicated in a parable than in a point. If He could show that persistence alone gets results from imperfect humans, how clear it would seem that God should also respond to those who sincerely and relentlessly ask.

When it comes to the discipline of prayer, my record is less than stellar. I’m embarrassed to say that for many years of my ministry, my prayer life was not nearly as regular and disciplined as it might have been. That’s why seven years ago, I began seeing a spiritual director – a Catholic layman in Wichita who has done extensive study and writing on spirituality and spiritual direction. I meet with Phil every six weeks or so, and he holds me accountable for my prayer discipline.

I know for a fact that there are many of you here today who are more regular and disciplined in your prayer life than I. I have learned and benefited from your witness to prayer. But my struggle is that I sometimes get caught up in the doing instead of just being in the presence of God. There’s a story about a man who joined a logging crew. He began work on Monday but was fired on Friday.

“But I’m the hardest worker you’ve got,” the young man protested. “I arrive first. I leave last. I even work through my coffee breaks. And no one can swing an axe more times per minute than I can.”

The foreman thought for a minute, and then asked “Have you been sharpening your axe?”

The young man replied: “I’ve been working too hard to take the time.”

Friends, I don’t have the whole prayer thing figured out – it does not come easily for me to sit still and take thirty minutes to speak and to listen to God. On those days when I do, I journal, I read from one of my favorite books (*Abandonment to Divine Providence*) – I act in silence, I listen to music, I use the words “Come Lord Jesus” as a centering prayer. I pray for me, I pray for you, I pray for others.

I don’t have it all figured out, but I do know I feel the power of God when you and I join hands and pray at the hospital – or in your home – or when we pray here in the sanctuary or downstairs in fellowship hall or via the email prayer chain. I also know the truth in what my spiritual director has told me many times – that much of prayer is just showin’ up – that we learn to pray by praying, that prayer must become as much of a daily routine as brushing your teeth or having that cup of coffee or reading the paper. I know also that prayer helps us develop our relationship with God, that the more we pray the deeper our spiritual well becomes, so that when we experience dry spells or periods of crisis or doubt, we have something on which to draw that will sustain us. I know that on mornings when I take seriously the discipline of prayer, I am better prepared to meet the challenges and embrace the opportunities that the day brings, and I am strengthened to avoid going down unhealthy paths.

Our lesson reminds us to pray and to be persistent. But what do we do when the prayers go unanswered? “Who knows,” says Frederick Buechner, “but just keep praying. Remember the midnight intruder banging on the door. Even if the person isn’t healed or even if the person dies, keep on beating the path to God’s door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat, with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer, the God you call upon will finally come. God will answer the door – and even if God does not bring you the answer you want, God will bring you himself.”

Whatever may be our doubts about how God answers prayer, Christ is clear about one thing in this parable – God answers. Just as any father would give good gifts to his children, so too will God respond to persistent prayer. There are no subtle theological arguments here about what God gives or when God gives or how God gives, just the assurance that in ways which are God’s alone, God will answer.

Let us pray: “Lord, teach us to pray.” When we fall on our knees let the words and worries of our hearts fall upon your ears. When we are confused in our search, put us on the right path. We have knocked at the same door time after time. Remind us to be patient disciples and to wait upon your answer. Amen.

Thanks to Robin Meyers for his description of the first century household.