

Effectual Prayer

Luke 11:1-13

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time/29th July 2007

Have you ever wondered what it must be like for God on the receiving end of all our prayers? Someone once made a videotape that runs for about an hour which features one person after the next making a request, asking for advice, seeking direction, requesting money, and so on. It's something you might find on YouTube. Face after face comes onto the screen, each in a plaintive mode asking for something. Request after request, is that how God experiences our prayers?

Or think of the opening scene in the holiday classic, "It's a Wonderful Life." The camera moves through the streets of Bedford Falls and from every house on just about every block we hear people praying for George Bailey. Voices tumble over voices, over and over again we hear, "Dear Lord, be with George, with George, bless George, O God, be with George, George Bailey, bless George."¹ Each person brings his or her own perspective to the petition, but the *subject* of concern is George and the *object* of every prayer is God. This chorus of prayer takes place simultaneously. The prayer is constant. Now multiply the concerns, the subjects of concerns of a world, and project them upon God. Petitions directed God's way from every direction. As you're asking for relief from pain, someone else is seeking direction for her life, and another is knocking on heaven's door to find the joy that was lost a long time ago. As we're praying for our neighbor, another is asking God for a job, and someone is seeking solace for their son or daughter in Iraq, and another is knocking hard on the door that will open into a room where peace might be found in a time of overwhelming grief.

Continuous. Constant. Never ending. The apostle Paul called us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). If you think about it, there's not a second of existence that is not touched by prayer somewhere in the world. Just think of monasteries and convents alone, scattered around the world in every time zone

¹ Both illustrations are cited at the Center for Excellence in Preaching website: <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewContent.php?iID=105&sID=1> (accessed 23rd July 2007). "It's a Wonderful Life" was produced in 1946 and directed by Frank Capra and based on the short story, "The Greatest Gift" written by Philip Van Doren Stern.

where the rhythm of every day is moved by prayer. Asking. Seeking. Searching. Pleading before God. When we pray, we are adding to the chorus.

Every Sunday in worship we share the Lord's Prayer together, adding to the chorus. As you can tell, Luke's version is considerably shorter than the one we know best from Matthew. Luke offers four points: pray for the coming of God's kingdom, food to eat, mercy to share, and protection. Jesus gives us this pattern because prayer was very important to him – we all know this. He was praying all the time. When the authorities pounced on him and arrested him, they knew exactly where he could be found, near the olive trees outside Jerusalem, that's where he prayed. In this text, we have these classic verses on the nature of prayer, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be open for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

That's what Jesus wants us to do when we pray: ask, seek, knock. Not once, not twice. Not sheepishly or reluctantly. Pound on the doors of heaven, let prayer be like a battering ram. Demand a hearing. Be persistent – give it your all. Author Jerry Sittser sees persistence through the eyes of a parent. "My kids have asked me for many things over the years – a CD player, bicycle, boat, car, house, exotic vacations . . . you name it, they have asked it. I ignore them most of the time. I am as hardhearted as they come, a parent made of granite. My ears perk up, however, when they persist, because persistence usually means they are serious about something."²

Yet, persistence is not always a foolproof indicator that what you're asking for is really what's best for you. My new cat, Angus, is quite persistent in getting my attention, asking, seeking, knocking, even biting his way to get my attention for food – starting around 6 a.m. Angus is relentlessly verbal and for the sake of my sanity and the need for sleep, I give in, feed him and go back to bed – I'm not made of granite.

As an aside – in thinking about this analogy, I was reminded of the pastor of my home church who liked to use his children in his sermon illustrations, just about every week. After a while, we got tired of it. So, know that I will keep my cat illustrations to a minimum (although I'm learning a lot).

² Cited in Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Zondervan, 2006), 150-151.

A child or adult can easily be directed by the persistent, determined will of the ego, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's what is needed or right or good. Just because we're unrelenting, doesn't mean it's what we need. This is probably a good justification for not getting the things we pray for. God's grace is involved in not giving us what we crave. But Jesus said so! "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." What about this verse? Why do my knocks go unanswered?

This verse has, perhaps, stung and humbled the human ego more than any other, forcing us to wonder what exactly is prayer? It's the center of our faith-walk, and yet it's the thing we probably struggle with the most. If it's so important, then why do we resist praying? Or, why are my prayers so ineffectual and why do I feel so inadequate when I do? Go into any Christian bookstore, like Cokesbury (behind the Double T Diner) or go to Barnes and Noble and you'll see shelves and shelves of books on prayer – collections of prayers, prayers of the saints, model prayers, books explaining how to pray, even the secrets of prayer – which are sometimes little more than techniques on how to manipulate God to get your way.³ It's a huge publishing industry. But it speaks to the hunger. People want to know. When we survey the congregation about the kinds of adult education classes you would like to see here at the church, there are always several responses asking for a class or two on prayer, on how to pray.

People also want to know what we are *allowed* to pray for. What is appropriate to ask, seek, and knock *for* and what is inappropriate? Certainly prayers for revenge or harm are out of the question – primarily because those kinds of requests do not conform with the goals of God's Kingdom, which is Jesus' first petition. This is actually a pretty good litmus test for any prayer. Does it conform to the vision of the kingdom? Which means, should we really be asking God for a parking space close to the entrance of the mall? I've been chastised for making this statement in the past. I don't think this is exactly what Jesus had in mind with this verse, but I confess that I have offered the Parking Space Prayer. Once, I asked God to slow me down and the next minute I was facing a police officer with a radar gun who clocked me going fifteen miles over the speed limit (yes, I got a ticket). What request is too small and which one is too big, knowing the laws of physics and biology? It would take a suspension of

³ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin by Thomas Merton (1915-1968), "What is the use of praying if at the very moment of prayer, we have so little confidence in God that we are busy planning our own kind of answer to our prayer?" *Thoughts in Solitude*.

these laws for a change of events – and yet, sometimes they do happen. Miracles occur and healing does take place when it is not anticipated from our perspective. These are the tough questions associated with this text. Ask. Seek. Knock. But we treat verses 9-10 as though they were a formula, a technique, a skill we could perfect on our own.

But I discovered two exciting things about this text this week, leading me to think maybe these are all the wrong questions, which actually take us away from the center of the text. First, notice that Jesus taught his disciples what to pray – and offers what we know as the Lord’s Prayer. But notice that the “what” question was a response to the “how” question of the disciples. Look at the text, it says in 11:1, “[Jesus] 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.’” It’s a curious statement; was Jesus in some way a disciple of John (presumably, the Baptist)? Were some of Jesus’ disciples first disciples of John? Or did they just hear how John taught his disciples? It’s a curious statement.

Jesus was deep in prayer, probably in a certain undisclosed location, a secret place communing with God, and the disciples are looking on. They’re not praying with him – they’re watching him pray, voyeurs everyone. I wonder what that looked like. Was Jesus standing, sitting, and kneeling, perhaps with face down toward the ground? And I wonder about what kind of expression he had on his face? They’re not praying with him – they’re watching him and when he finishes, they basically say to him, “Lord, how do you do that, that – that kind of praying, what you did just now. How do you do that? Teach us to do the same.” In other words, they’re saying to him, “That’s what we want – that intensity, that intimacy, that kind of communion with God. How do we get that?” And in response to their desire, Jesus not only gives them the outline of prayer, the “what,” but then the parable of the friend who comes pounding on your door in the middle of night, asking, seeking, knocking for help. That’s how we are to pray the Lord’s Prayer.

Here comes the second new thing. Ask, seek, knock and you’ll receive, and find – *but it’s not a blank check to ask for anything we want.* The way these verses have been read often say more about the way our ego-centric perspectives mess up everything in the world, including how we hear scripture. Jesus’ isn’t saying: here’s how to get whatever you want. God knows the evil in the human heart. For God to act this way it would actually be abusive. But the Father knows how to give good gifts to his children and the good gift the Father will bestow is: *himself* – when we ask, and seek, and knock, persistent in our search,

not for things or dreams or comforts, but for him – *for God*, the *object* of Jesus’ persistent prayer. The key to the passage is verse 13, “. . . how much more will the heavenly Father give” – *what?* – “the Holy Spirit to” – *to whom?* – “to those who *ask* him!”⁴ What Jesus promises here is that through our persistent, relentless asking, seeking, and knocking we will receive, and find the very presence of God – and the very doors of the kingdom will open before us. *That’s* what’s promised. In some ways, that’s all – and everything – that’s promised: the presence of God. What more do we need? This is what we are to be persistent about, demand a hearing: God show up! Make your presence known! Be here – in my life and family, in this world and church, be here, show up in my heart!

I have a collection of prayers of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), they’re brilliant, full of so much depth and joy and love and wisdom and passion for God. In one prayer, we get a sense of how he viewed Luke 11: “Father in Heaven!” – this is how he began most of his prayers, always with an exclamation point – talk of demanding a hearing, a declamatory declaration that God is God – “We know indeed that seeking is never without its promise, how then could we fail to seek Thee, the author of all promises, and the giver of all good gifts! We know well that the seeker does not always have to wander far afield, since the more sacred the object of his search the nearer it is to him; and if he seek Thee, O God, Thou art of all things most near!”⁵

We’re all hungering for a deeper, richer, more meaningful prayer life. It’s not going to be found in books full of techniques, how-to guides, or something like a *Prayer for Dummies* volume. We can learn a lot from Christian mystics and those who have led the way before us, like Kierkegaard. We can pray other people’s prayers, which is what we do when we read the psalms and even the Lord’s Prayer. However, we can read the psalms and say the Lord’s Prayer without either of these ever really touching our hearts and changing our lives, without really connecting to God. What we’re looking for is that connection to God – which Jesus had and what he offers through the Spirit. This is what every disciple really wants. And we experience it only in the practice, in the doing, by actually praying – by honestly asking for God’s presence, and truthfully searching for God’s face, and passionately pursuing God with every ounce of our being. It cannot be passive, but must be personal – not someone else’s search,

⁴ Grateful for this critical insight from the commentary section at: <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewContent.php?iID=105&sID=1> (accessed 23rd July 2007).

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*, Edited and with a New Interpretation of His Life and Thought by Perry D. LeFevre (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 22.

but yours. Not someone else's knocks, but yours. There comes a time when we have to pray on our own, using our own words, expressing the deepest desires of the heart for God, trying to find the words that best describe what our souls hunger for, but might be reluctant or scared to name or pursue. The words are important, but even words have their limits.

The more intense our asking, seeking, knocking, the more we connect with the depths of our being, the more attentive and inward we become, as Kierkegaard knew, the more we realize that we might have less and less to say, and we become completely *silent*.⁶ Silent. Kierkegaard is a helpful guide here. "To pray," he once said, "does not mean to listen to oneself speaking. Prayer involves becoming silent and being silent and waiting until God is heard." Hearing God – that would be an answer to prayer. Isn't that what we're really searching for? Hearing God.

In the silence a shift takes place within us, away from our egos toward God. God takes over the prayer. God prays through us. The One we've been asking, searching, and knocking for actually shows up. And in the silence we receive and find and know the One we've been pursuing all our lives.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*

⁶ Cf. the comment by Kierkegaard printed in the bulletin: "As my prayer became more attentive and inward I had less and less to say. I finally become completely silent."