

Luke 11:5-13

“Inhaling the Spirit of God?”

When I was still part time as the Chaplain at Presbyterian Community, I also served part time as the Interim minister at Pickens Presbyterian Church. Pickens is one of those small towns where everybody knows everybody. I went to the small, local hospital EARLT one morning to visit a church who was a local veterinarian. I was definitely the first customer for the Pink Lady so she jumped up and greeted me with a happy “Good Morning, can I help you?” “I’m here to see Al Glenn” I told her. “WHO” she asked? So I repeated, “Al Glenn.” The pink lady kind of lowered her voice and said, “Honey, he doesn’t work HERE. He’s a VETERINARIAN!”

Sometimes, even the most deliberate answer can be confusing. That is how we often feel when we read the parables of Jesus. Often Jesus’ parables were an answer to a question, as this one is. But many times, his listeners were so perplexed that they had to ask for an explanation so he could clarify his point. At times, however, his parables are so clear cut in meaning that there is NO escaping what Jesus expects us to gain. THIS is on of THOSE parables.

The parable of the friend at midnight, as it is often called, is in answer to a question about how to pray. The response is clear. We must pray persistently. I often have people ask me, “Why must I pray if God knows what I am thinking?” This is a valid question. I don’t for one minute think that if I go to God and say, “Please be with Mary, she is in the hospital” that he will come back with “You’re kidding. Which one?”

But we all know of the importance that communication plays in a good relationship and that is why we pray. Recently I came across a quote by Edwin Keith that is so beautiful that I believe it may give us a different way of looking at our need to pray. He says, “Prayer is exhaling the spirit of man and inhaling the spirit of God.” Isn’t that a beautiful idea? Think of how many times a day you sigh, you exhale. I sigh out of despair, out of fatigue, out of disgust, out of happiness. So every time you exhale you give that despair, that tiredness, that disgust, that happiness to God and he simply inhales it into his own heart. Then he exhales HIS Spirit and allows us to breathe HIS love into our hearts. Let’s try it.

Everyone think of something that is in your heart – good or bad. Now take a deep breath and hold it in, thinking of that thing. Then exhale that thought like a prayer and let God take it into his heart. Then when you breathe again, your heart has room for the spirit of God to come in. Isn’t that a wonderful concept and reason enough to be persistent in prayer?

Jesus himself was clear about the need to be persistent because the original Greek text actually read, “Keep on asking and you will receive, keep on searching and you will find, keep on knocking and the door will be opened.” Some will say that to pray the same thing twice shows a lack of faith. That once you give something to God, He answers it in the best way possible and you shouldn’t keep bringing it up. Yet, Jesus not only told us differently by his parable but also showed us by his example.

We know that Christ prayed the same prayer repeatedly in the space of several hours in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Lord, take this cup from me.” That is why the writer of Hebrews said, “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers

and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.” In the Old Testament, God instructs Moses to tell the people that *every time* they realize their needs have been filled by God, they should praise Him. And the apostle Paul reminds us to “pray without ceasing” in his letter to Thessalonica.

So let’s look at the parable more closely. The neighbor in the story did not give bread to the other neighbor because he was his friend but because of the seeker’s persistence. Clearly, God’s word models the necessity to keep on praying for every need and thanksgiving.

The other thing that this parable teaches us is about the kind of answer that God will give us when we pray persistently. In ancient times, if a visitor came to your house, it was *expected* that you would offer him bread. No matter what time a guest showed up or how unexpected he or she was, you were to offer bread or it was considered an insult and you would be regarded as a bad host – an unthinkable sin to the ancient Jew.

The man in the story was unprepared and decided, like many of us would, to go to his neighbor for help. Now homes in those days were usually one room, with most of the living room in the front space of a house. An elevated platform toward the back of the house was part of the same room and this is where the whole family slept together on mats. Also, many folks brought their animals into the house to sleep in the front room. So when the neighbor pounded on the door at midnight, the friend would have had to climb over his children and possibly some livestock to get to the door! So it is really easy to understand why his first response was, “GO AWAY!”

But because of his persistence, the neighbor finally gets up and gives him what he needs. This is the key to the parable – HE GIVES HIM WHAT HE NEEDS! Some of us

might be tempted to ignore the knocking and pretend to sleep through it. But the sleepy neighbor saved face for his friend by giving him just what he needed – a loaf of bread - nothing more and nothing less. Jesus then goes on to say, if an earthly father will give his child what SHE needs, imagine how much more your heavenly Father will do the same. Note that the parable does not say that a good parent gives the child what she ASKS for, but rather what is needed.

I was visiting a friend once, whose two year old was just starting to expand her vocabulary and also learning her manners. At one point she interrupted our conversation by saying, “Mom, I want nother cookie PEASE.” “No more, Caroline” her mother replied. “But mom, PEASE,” she repeated. “No Caroline, you may not have another cookie” her mother stood firm. So Caroline threw back her hands and said emphatically, “PEASE, PEASE, PEASE!” Caroline thought that if she used nice manners, she would get another cookie. Her Mom knew that another cookie would probably make her sick and did not give it to her, despite her persistence. So if an earthly parent can answer a child by giving what is best, how much better will the reply of God be to our requests?

Now, we understand this intellectually but let’s be honest. How many of us have ever wondered what in the world God was doing up there when we clearly had such a great need that He did not answer? How many of us have prayed for a loved one to be healed, only to watch him die? How many of us have asked for guidance, only to feel like you were left on your own to make a decision without a clue of what God’s will was? How many us of have prayed for a child to make the right choice, only to have him hurt tremendously and have to watch him suffer the consequences of his actions?

But it is exactly because of this parable that we can find hope in situations like these. Jesus teaches us that we are not wringing gifts from an unwilling God but going to the one who knows our needs better than we know them ourselves and whose heart towards us is the heart of generous love. So when we don't get what we prayed for, it is because God knows our needs better than we. I believe if the friend had needed to give his neighbor a knock on the noggin', that's what he would have received in Jesus' parable if that would have helped Jesus explain how much God provides for us. But the neighbor knew that his friend REALLY NEEDED bread and that is what he got!

There is a third element to this parable that I think is very important to us. I said earlier that the parable was an answer to a question. I think it is significant to reflect on WHO asked the question. The question "How should we pray" was asked by Jesus' DISCIPLES! The eleventh chapter of Luke begins, "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'." Jesus answered with the Lord's Prayer.

Because it was the disciples who made the request, I think we are given a strong message on the importance of prayer in discipleship. People who do not believe in Jesus may not want to *hear about* him or how great Jesus is or what he has done in our lives, but they AT LEAST expect us to behave the way we SAY we believe. So Christians are *expected* to be praying people!

But the truth is that PRAYER, especially in public, seems to be a stumbling point for many faithful Christians, myself included. I have a huge fear of having to pray in front of other ministers. I also will tell you that I don't have a very "regimental" prayer life. Sometimes my prayers are kind of like "stream of consciousnesses" and last all day

long. Other times, I start out praying for someone or some thing in particular and all of the sudden I realize my mind has wandered off to the grocery store. Can anyone relate?

I was so relieved to read minister Barbara Brown Taylor's book An Altar in the World. Her chapter on prayer is called "The Practice of being Present". In it, she calls herself a failure at prayer because her prayer life is so unconventional. She says, "I would rather show someone my checkbook stubs than talk about my prayer life." I guess people expect ministers to have such perfect spiritual disciplines that we can be afraid to admit our true selves. She says that prayer can be simply appreciating a beautiful full moon or being thankful for a phone call. In other words, prayer is more than my idea of prayer or yours. Jesus tells us in this parable that prayer is simply stating what you need or think and then trusting God to handle it in the best way!

The other thing I hear from folks about prayer is concern over the quality of their prayer. I called a friend the other morning and she said, "I just finished my morning prayer and I had a really GOOD one today!" I didn't ask her what she meant but it brought to mind Richard Foster's words.

He says, "Just as a child cannot draw a bad picture, so a child of God cannot make a bad prayer." Think about it! If your three-year-old grandchild scribbles blue and red on piece of paper and gives it to you, what do you with it? You hang it on your refrigerator. In the same way, when we bring *any* prayer to God, he is so happy to hear from us and our words are so precious to him that God hangs that picture right on the fridge. Everything you or I say to God is important to Him.

No matter what our prayer practices or beliefs, I believe we all have times when our prayer life becomes boring or redundant. We are too tired or too busy. So perhaps

the persistent friend will make us all think about the quality of our prayer lives and the faithfulness of our God, even when we forget to talk to him. The next time you feel that your prayers are inadequate, picture your requests hanging on the Heavenly refrigerator for Divine consideration. And every time you sigh, remember that you are exhaling your joys and concerns and inhaling the Spirit of God and that God lovingly receives every word, every picture, every breath that we dare to give him. Amen.

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