

Luke 11: 1-13 "Everyone who asks" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/4/19

In a "Frank and Ernest" comic strip, one of them has a conversation with God: "Is it true, God, that a thousand years is but a second to you?" "Yes," God answers. "And is it true that a million dollars is but a penny to you?" "Yes" "So you consider giving a penny just like giving a million dollars?" "Yes." "Well then, can I have a penny?" "Certainly," God responded, "just wait a second." Today is all about prayer, that conversation with God, where, according to Jesus, we recognize both our need and the source of our help. Jesus knows enough about us to know that there are no atheists in foxholes, implying that prayer is native to all of us when we are under stress, and even when we would like just a few extra dollars to pay our bills. In such times, no instructions are needed because fear, pain, and desperate need become the first teachers of prayer. Prayer is some sort of sanctified wish-fulfillment as we put a coin in the slot machine and have all our dreams come true, if we just pray the right way. Yet it is true that if there is a "God-shaped hole" in every human heart, it seems natural for us to cry out to have that hole-filled.

The disciples, like us, become curious about prayer outside of those moments of desperation and need as they notice Jesus doing a lot of it. So they ask Jesus, "teach us to pray," and our text today is the shortened version of his response in which we realize there is no reason to all of it was spoken in one sitting. It could easily be a collection of phrases Jesus provided which he deemed important when entering into a conversation with God. In observing Jesus' lifestyle, we can deduce that he was far more concerned with building a relationship with God in prayer rather than having all the phrases correct. That relationship is founded on honesty with God, something Mark Trotter alludes to as he writes, (when you pray) "Throw anything out there. Stumble, use bad grammar, have long embarrassing pauses, split

your infinitives and even dangle your participles. It doesn't matter (how you phrase it). Just groan or sigh if that's all you can do, because God's hearing your prayer doesn't depend on your eloquence but on God's grace, which is already at work in your life." Sometimes words aren't even a necessity as exemplified by two good friends and masters of words, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. It is said that one evening, they shared time together for 2 hours sitting in front of the fire saying nothing. At the end of the time, Thoreau got up to leave, and each thanked the other for a wonderful evening. Being silent together can be a beautiful expression of the relationship between good friends for as St. Teresa said, "The life of prayer is simply being with God and enjoying being with God." At its heart, it is being honest with God, so don't pull any punches in telling God how you feel and what you want, any more than Jesus did. In fact, even in this all too familiar Lord's Prayer, we find a list of requests or petitions such as "give us this day our daily bread; forgive us our sins; do not bring us to trial," and some versions add the fourth imperative, "rescue us from the evil one." These imperatives are voiced with some urgency acknowledging our limited capacity to save ourselves.

In order to underscore the point, Jesus, good rabbi that he is, adds some stories to illustrate. He tells of going to a friend at midnight in need of three loaves of bread, not having enough bread of one's own. The bread in this story, according to Walter Brueggeman, is no doubt the same daily bread for which we have just been instructed to pray. But it is late, and the friend is asleep, and doesn't want to be disturbed – "Don't bother me," the friend says, "the door is locked, my children are in bed; I can't get up and give you anything." The request fails. But Jesus says, "Pound on the door of your friend harder." If you do that long enough, the friend will get up at midnight, inconvenient as it is, and give you what you need. I will never

forget the night my ex-husband and I decided to fix the leaky kitchen faucet after Mikayla, then only 4 years old, had thankfully gone to sleep. We had all we needed to replace it, we turned off the water under the sink, and began unscrew the nozzle...some water began to drizzle out the faucet but we just figured it was leftover water in the pipes so off came the faucet and out came a geyser spraying every which way. I quickly covered it with my hands which only made the water spew in more directions – why do we think that is helpful? And John went to look for the main water source, which he couldn't find. We had been in the house for 6 months and we never thought to ask. After my initial anger subsided, I began to pray, "Please God show him where the main water shut-off is, direct him to the right place," but it was to no avail and he ran next door to the neighbor whose house was very similar to ours. At this point Mikayla has woken up and is screaming bloody murder and all I can do is call out to her that it is going to be ok while getting completely soaked. The neighbor of course was sound asleep and John almost gave up but decided to give the door one last series of knocks when the guy finally opened the door. Persistence paid off as the neighbor trodded next door and promptly led John to the valve, surprised and perturbed that we new homeowners hadn't asked about it sooner. With Rabbi Jesus' parable, the bread given at midnight is not be because of friendship; it is given because of "persistence." That is the word in the text and it is the only time the term is used in the New Testament. It can be translated "shamelessness," "shameless boldness," or that wonderful Yiddish word, "chutzpah." "Chutzpah" is "nerve," something a person has who murders his parents and then throws himself on the mercy of the court because he is an orphan. But context is the rule here – if someone wakes you up in the middle of the night to

ask for bread, do you say, “How persistent” or “What nerve?” Probably most of us would question the nerve of some people.

About 6 years ago, a state legislator from Nashville filed a bill in the Tennessee State House which would in effect provide that if the grades of a child from a poor family went down, then less state money would be given to that family in need as a part of their welfare support. Financial support would be linked to grade performance. But 8 year old Amira Fetuga would not accept such a proposal. She followed that congressman around the State House all day, continually talking to him and telling him how cruel his bill was. He tried to dismiss her as a “prop,” but she was relentless all day long. She was persistent filled with chutzpah. But then, after a long day, when the cameras would give the congressman no relief, he relented and withdrew his bill. Amira was a model of persistent petition that bordered on shamelessness. This what Jesus is talking about here. Ask, seek, knock, pray urgently with the Hebrew word being “tefilah” where not just words are used but actions to match the need.

Now this story is not to insinuate that God gives grudgingly simply because we make a pest of ourselves in prayer. The next story helps to clarify that it is all about the relationship which is built when we are persistent and bold, for God already knows our needs and is working towards our best interests. A child says to her parent, “Daddy, can I have a piece of fish?” “No, have this plate of snakes.” “Mommy can I have an egg for breakfast?” “No, eat this bowl of scorpions.” The illustrations are ridiculous – a parent, even us imperfect ones, are not going to give our children poisonous or dangerous foods; those who do such things are not considered parents and are punished by law. From another viewpoint, God isn’t that helicopter parent who hovers over us catering to our every urge or whim but God is that perfect parent who

smiles and finds joy in hearing and interacting with God's children, in providing the ultimate gift we most need. In Luke's version, that gift is called the Holy Spirit as Luke is most certainly anticipating the telling of the Spirit's work within the church found in the book of Acts.

So it turns out that people are agents of need, urgently requiring what we cannot secure for ourselves. To be a creature of need is a countercultural claim in a society that praises self-sufficiency, a culture that can conjure a drug or cosmetic or exercise program or technology to master everything. Jesus invites us to that assertiveness and persistence in the presence of God, not so we can somehow manipulate God into giving us what we want, but so that we can be transformed into creatures solely dependent upon the grace of God. As Karl Barth said, "Prayer is simply asking;" asking in need, asking in boldness, asking until gifts are given so that our life together may flourish. In the end, Jesus summons us to be like 8 year old Amira, shameless and filled with boldness, so that we might receive that life-changing, God-shaped Holy Spirit, if we will just ask. Amen.