

Scripture

Psalm 138

Margie Conner

Psalm 138 is a song of whole-hearted thanksgiving for salvation. Although composed as a personal song, it can be understood as a communal song of praise for the God's people. The basic report of deliverance "I called – you answered" declares the reason for praise, and elicits continued trust in God saving mercy.

- ¹I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
- ²I bow down toward your holy temple
and give thanks to your name
for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;
for you have exalted your name and your word
above everything.
- ³On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.
- ⁴All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.
- ⁵They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,
for great is the glory of the Lord.
- ⁶For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he perceives from far away.
- ⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand,
and your right hand delivers me.
- ⁸The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Luke 11: 1-13

The reading today begins with yet another very familiar teaching from Jesus, although in a less familiar form. Luke's presentation of the Lord's Prayer is less oriented toward community worship (as Matthew's version is used) and is, as Luke specified, instruction on how to pray. Luke follows up the initial model with two parables in which Jesus encourages his disciples to be brave and bold in approaching God and assures them of God's faithful answer.

¹He 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.”

²He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.

³Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

⁵And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If 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!”

Sermon “Ask, Search, Knock”

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again”. How many of you have actually lived that advice? How many of you tried it, at least a little, and gave up? I can honestly say that is true of my experience golfing. I tried, I failed. I tried, I failed. I tried, I gave up! But on other things, trying and trying again, in cooking, sewing, music, and other things as well, persistence paid off, eventually. If that is true in our daily lives, why should it be any different in our spiritual lives. That is Jesus’ word to us today. Be Persistent.

In our gospel account, one of Jesus’ disciples comes to him with a surprising request ‘teach us to pray’. As a Jew, he knew how to pray, yet there was something more this man wanted. And so Jesus gives him, and us, a model - the Lord’s Prayer, which we all know and love and say persistently, right? But Jesus doesn’t

end his lesson with ‘for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory.’ Rather he goes on with a very funny, very odd story about a man who bangs on his neighbor’s door in the middle to borrow some bread. At first, he is told to go away – “I am in bed and so is all the family.” But he keeps on knocking – and by now everyone is awake. Probably the kids are crying. The goats, chickens and rooster, are all in the house as well, would be making a racket, too. Even the neighbors would be roused by the commotion. And because the man carries on knocking, his friend opens the door and gives him, not just some bread but everything he needs.

And Jesus says, the reason he gets up and opens the door is because of his neighbor’s persistence. The Greek word used here is a very strong one, and means kind of a shameless persistence, shameless audacity. He won’t take no for an answer! Then Jesus gives us the marching orders of persistence, and a promise. Ask and it will be given to you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you. And just in case we assume that God is the indifferent neighbor who won’t help a friend, Jesus adds another illustration of how much more loving and giving God is than even the compassion and care of our parental hearts.

It may seem strange that the God who knows what we need before we ask still insists on us praying, and on our persistent praying. But there is this mysterious thread running throughout the Scriptures, where, it seems, God loves us to be persistent, to desire something with all our heart and soul and to not give up asking. There is that marvelous story in Genesis 32 of Jacob wrestling with the angel – really with God. He wrestled with him all night, but even though his hip was put out of joint as he wrestled, he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And the angel blessed him because of his persistence – fighting with God, and not letting God go until he was blessed. Would you dare to do that? Yet God seems to honor such persistence.

In the Gospels, a Gentile woman begs Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter. No, Jesus says, it’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs. But she won’t let him go. “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” (Mark 7:24-30) Jesus is so moved by her persistence that he cures her daughter.

There’s another story we know even better, where four men carry their paralyzed friend to Jesus. They tried and tried to get into the room where Jesus was teaching, but there was such a crowd they couldn’t get near him. So they removed the roof of the house and let down the man as he laid on his mat. (Mark 2: 1-12) They actually removed the roof! That’s persistence! And Jesus healed their friend and he walked again.

So why do we need to pray so persistently? Is it about knocking on the door of God's heart so much that in the end he gets fed up with us and answers our prayer? No, I don't think so. Rather, persistent prayer, and why it seems to be so honored throughout Scripture, is because such prayer reflects our deepest desire and passion – and so often it comes from a place of great love.

And such love is always answered with an equal love from God. Does that mean that all our prayers will be answered the way we want, or even plead? I wish it were so, but no. You know that experience, I am sure. But if that is disheartening and incomprehensible to you, just remember, Jesus prayed a lot, even passionately and shamelessly in the garden of Gethsemane. And his prayer, the prayer of God's beloved Son, was unanswered. Or was it?

We can only imagine our prayers being answered according to our will, but even Jesus was smart enough to pray 'nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.' We practice that prayer every week, 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done.' Jesus' promise, Jesus' experience says yes; and he assures us everyone who asks, receives. Maybe not what we expect, but the sure gift he promises at the end of his lesson on prayer is this "How much more will the Heaven Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him." Maybe that is the deepest answer to all our prayers.

Ask, my friends, and keep on asking - and God is sure to answer. Amen.

***Hymn** "Eternal Spirit of the Living Christ" NCH 520

Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the People

Loving God, we thank you for your faithfulness and goodness to us. We thank you for Jesus Christ, who faithfully revealed your ways to us, and walked that way for our salvation. We thank you for your Spirit, who continually teaches us his truths and empowers us as his disciples. And so we come to you now, confident that you hear our requests, and that you will always answer them in love.

We pray for your church and for this congregation. May our discipleship be one of persistence in pursuing your presence and following your will. May we receive your grace as we lift our hearts to you in praise, our needs to you in hope, and our lives to you in obedience. May we become a people bound and

directed by the prayer our Savior taught us, so that your reign may be on earth, as it is in heaven.

We pray for our world and all its leaders. Uphold them as they bear the burdens of the world and answer them swiftly as they seek your wisdom in establishing your good will for this earth. We pray also for all who cry out to you today. Grant your healing to the ill, your comfort to the sorrowful, and your aid to the needy. We especially lift up... and we thank you for...

We praise you, Faithful God, for all your goodness to us through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Choral Response

Remember Me

Offering

Invitation: God is good and faithful when we cry out in prayer. Such mercy calls for an outpouring of gratitude, such compassion calls for a response of generosity. Our offerings are an expression of our trust in God and our compassion towards a suffering world. Let us give in hope.

Offertory Music

Doxology

Prayer: Compassionate God, through these offerings we praise you for you're the boundless blessings of earth and heaven. We would respond to your goodness with the fullness of our lives, reflecting the way of Christ in our relationship to you and to the world. Bless and multiply our efforts, to your glory. Amen.

* **Hymn** "God Be With You Till We Meet Again" NCH 81

***Common Commission**

Let us go forth into the world in peace, being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted, honoring all persons, loving and serving the Lord, and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

*** Benediction**

Go now into the world

Building your lives on the foundation of our holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, safeguarding yourselves in the love of God and anticipating the mercy of Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. Jude 20-21

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

Postlude "Because He Lives," Wm. and G. Gaither, arr. Phillip Keveren

music provided by Chris Harris and Lynne Walker