

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JULY 25, 2010
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scriptures: Psalm 85; Luke 11:1-13; Colossians 2: 6-15

PERSISTENT PRAYER

I have called my message today “Persistent Prayer,” but I might have called it “Bold Prayer” or “Believing Prayer.” The passage from Luke begins with what we know as the Lord’s Prayer. After that opening section, Jesus gives a little story about a man knocking on the door of his friend and neighbor at midnight, waking up the whole house. All because he wants to borrow some bread because he has an unexpected guest from out-of-town. He isn’t prepared for his guest and he is desperate. I know that feeling, how about you?

When our son Paul was in high school he went on a couple mission trips— one to Scotland and one to the Philippines. On the day he left for one of those trips, we had all gotten up in the middle of the night to take him in to O’Hare Airport to catch a plane taking him to New York and then on overseas. We were very tired having only gotten a few hours sleep, and we were kind of stressed over having our young son so far away from home for two months. We were expecting a visit the next day from a man Gordon had known in the Army who regularly sent Christmas cards with notes each year. He and his family were going to be passing through our way on vacation and planned to stop and hoped they could stay with us. We hadn’t seen them for probably 17-18 years, so we did not know what to expect. But we said that we would be glad to have them.

When I got home from the airport I stripped all the beds and started washing sheets and towels in order to have everything done and ready for the next day. We decided to have a simple soup and sandwich supper and get to bed early. About three in the afternoon, just as I had begun to remake the beds and had started to think how

nice a little nap would be, the kids came to tell me there were people at the door. Yes, you guessed it! Our guests had arrived 24 hours early to find exhausted hosts, unmade beds, and no nice dinner prepared. When I couldn't help but exclaim, "You're early!" I could strongly sense that they already knew that. Their plans had changed, but they had not bothered to tell us. Later, we discovered that the real reason they wanted to come to our little town, and be there early, was that there was a horse racing track near by and they liked to play the ponies.

I do understand how the man with unexpected guests in Luke's gospel must have felt that night with company showing up at midnight needing to be fed. No wonder he went to his friend for help. On the other hand, who wants to be the one awakened from sleep and dragged out of bed because someone needs bread in the middle of the night. Jesus makes the point of the story. The man may not get up and answer the door and give his friend what he wants for friendship sake, but he will do it! Why? Because the man will not stop knocking on the door! Who knows, perhaps his little children will begin to cry. Maybe the neighbors will start looking out their windows to see what the commotion is all about. The man will not give up. Jesus says, it is his shameless persistence which causes his friend to give in and do what he asks. What a wonderful little phrase— "shameless persistence." Could it be, my friends, that Jesus is inviting us to use a little shameless persistence in our *prayer* life, after all, this is what Jesus is talking about here— prayer.

I believe that all our children should be taught the Lord's Prayer, just as I think they should learn the Ten Commandments, some of the hymns and songs of our faith, the 23rd Psalm and other things. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who know none of those. A so-called true story: A judge said to a man standing before him, " if you can recite the Lord's prayer, I will let you go." The criminal responded, "Now I lay me down to sleep....." And the judge said, "You may go." With the decline in church

attendance especially among young people, and the millions of children who are not being taught the basic Christian values the future can seem scary. Some people blame the schools for not allowing prayer or the Bible, but the real problem is that we now have second and third generations of kids who will never know what it is like to go to Sunday School and their parents who do not recognize “The Lord is My Shepherd.” They will not know how to pray, but they will try anyway when the situation warrants it—usually during times of intense pain and suffering when they will call out “Oh my God!” and hope it is so. And when there is a death of a loved one, they will want the minister to say some good words from the Bible because they know it is the thing to do. And even though the prayers of the member of the clergy bring tears to their eyes, it is an emotional release with no idea of how to really talk to God. Therein is the greatest sadness of all— the separation, lack of connection to God.

Jesus said to his disciples, “And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” But wait a minute you might be saying, **God does not answer all my prayers!** Or at least, he doesn’t answer them the way that I ask. How can that be lined up with what Jesus is saying in this passage? Do you get what you ask for, do you find what you are seeking, and is the door always opened to you? Jesus seems to be saying yes to that question. He says, “For **everyone** who asks, receives. **Everyone** who seeks, finds. And to **everyone** who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Someone has said, “There are three ways God answers prayer: Yes, not yet, I have something better.” There are times though when the situation is so horrible, we pray and pray, and we know in our heart of hearts that we might not live if the answer is “not yet.” We wonder what God can be thinking, yet we continue to pray. We pray

because we must. The words of C.S. Lewis to a friend who questioned why he prayed shed some light, "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God; it changes ME."

And then we must not forget that last part of the passage. Jesus asks what man if his child asks him for a fish will give him a snake? Or if the child asks for an egg will give him a scorpion? Some of the older translations included a third question, "What man if his child asks for bread will give him a stone?" A father would not do that to his child unless he were a very bad man. Parents want to do their children good, they want to give them good gifts, good food, they want only the best for them. Think once again about the whole matter of persistence. Did you ever have or see a child begging his mother or father for something? Please, Mom, please. Please let me have a puppy, I'll take care of him all by myself. You won't have to do anything. Please, Dad, let me go out with my friends tonight. I know it's a school night, but I won't be late and we won't go anywhere we shouldn't. I promise! Pleeeeeease! Children can nag and beg until you feel like tearing your hair out. And sometimes, unless you are very, very strong, they get what they want just so that you don't have to listen to them any longer.

Persistence doesn't always result in the answer yes, though. A child who begs for a puppy is too young for the responsibility, so the parents say no, not yet, in a couple of years. The boy who wants to go out with his friends on a school night is answered with a "no." The rule is no going out on school night and that is final. But there are "yeses" along the way too, answers to shameless persistence for very good reasons.

I think of Charles Goodyear the man who against all odds, years of deprivation

and extreme poverty, months and months in debtors prison, how after many years he invented the vulcanization process for making rubber. He was a devoted man of God, a Congregationalist too by-the-way. Goodyear believed that he was called by God to pursue his work because it would be for the benefit of all mankind. He never gave up, though it must have seemed to him that God was always saying, “not yet.” Over and over again his experiments failed, but he struggled on. Exposure to harsh chemicals, such as nitric acid and lead oxide, adversely affected his health, and once he nearly suffocated by gas generated in his laboratory. Goodyear survived, but the resulting fever came close to taking his life. The biography found at the Goodyear corporation website has this statement:

“ At night he lay awake, afraid that he would die and the secret die with him. He pawned his watch and the household furniture. When even the dinnerware was gone, he made rubber dishes to eat from. Then the food was gone too. [In the] spring [of 1839] he went to Boston to look up friends, found none, was jailed for nonpayment of a \$5 hotel bill, and came home to find his infant son dead. Unable to pay for a funeral, Goodyear hauled the little coffin to the graveyard in a borrowed wagon. Of the 12 Goodyear children, six died in infancy.”

Goodyear lived for sixteen years after his discovery of the vulcanization process. During the last six he was unable to walk without crutches. He was indifferent to money. To make his discoveries of still greater service to mankind was his whole aim. It was others who made fortunes out of his inventions. Goodyear died a poor man.

Even so, Goodyear believed until the end that God had honored his commitment and his shameless persistent prayer. He did not give up even when it would have seemed to some that God was saying “no” or at the very least “not yet.” The truth is that God was saying to Goodyear what he often says to you and me, “I have something even better in mind.”

When you reach out your hand and ask God with all your yearning to give you an egg, a fish.....the desire of your heart, God will not answer by giving you a snake or a scorpion. God will not slap your hand away in rejection. But God who knows how to give his children the finest of gifts and has filled you with his Holy Spirit will answer your prayer according to his good will. These are the promises of our Lord Jesus Christ who died for you so that you might live in faith and trust in Him! Amen.