



ST. MICHAEL'S SERMONS

Greenville, SC

July 29, 2007

Luke 11:1-13

Vicar Elise Stringer

"Prayerful Persistence"

If you've ever raised or spent much time with a 5 year old, you know the definition of persistent. It's that constant tugging at your shirt, that relentless whisper, "may I?, can we?." It's that not so gentle nudge to throw the baseball just one more time, or to sit for yet another imaginary tea party. ***Children can teach us a thing or two about persistence.***

If I heard it once, I must have heard it a thousand times... "Do not tap me, Elise." You see, if you can imagine it, I was a persistent child. And when I was feeling particularly needy for something, I would tap my parents arm or back until they turned around to listen -- only to hear my "oh so important" plea for one more of this, or a little more time doing that. I tapped and tapped, whether in the line at the grocery store, asking for another pack of gum, or reaching forward from the back seat to find out "how much longer 'til we get there?" Persistence just came naturally for me, especially when there was something I really wanted. I imagine that might be true for most of us.

When it comes to something we really want, we know how to be persistent. Our culture teaches that sometimes we have to be. Maybe we're persistent in getting a lower price on a new car, or convincing someone to hire us for that perfect job, or maybe you're persistent in teaching your children responsibility and respect, or maybe our persistence has to do with advocacy for public policy, or a political agenda. Maybe it's as simple as being persistent in getting someone to listen to our ideas, our hopes and our dreams.

Whatever it may be, when it's important to us, we know how to be persistent. So what is important to us? In today's Gospel lesson from Luke we hear the parable of the friend at midnight. The story told by Jesus, of a man who was not only persistent but shameless in asking for what he needed. He had a friend arrive in the night and he needed three loaves of bread to feed his friend and probably the friend's family as well. The man in the parable had no bread prepared and went to his neighbor's house to ask for the bread and of course found the neighbor and his family in bed for the night. At first the neighbor said, "Do not bother me, the door has already been locked and my children are in bed with me." But because of his persistence in asking the neighbor got up from bed and gave the friend the three loaves of bread he requested.

When something is important to us, we know how to be persistent. What is important to us?

Prayer is important to Jesus and Jesus is persistent in prayer. Jesus is frequently praying in the Gospels: at baptism, before choosing the 12 disciples, before the first prophecy of his passion, at his transfiguration and on many other occasions. And now in this Gospel lesson from Luke His prayer life has brought about questioning from a disciple.

"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.' And Jesus said to them, 'pray this way.'

"Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Jesus doesn't give the disciples a general answer about how to pray, but rather He gives them a form in which to pray and the words to use.

The Lord's Prayer, given to the disciples gathered that day and to those of us here now, is truly a gift of relationship. The prayer begins with "Father", which immediately encourages an intimate family relationship, one of love, trust and guidance. It teaches us to pray to God as we would speak to our earthly parent, expressing our needs, our desires and our fears. Free from worry that we might be misunderstood or ignored.

Jesus' father/son relationship with God is expressed practically in prayer, when He prays, ***Abba, Father.*** This parent/child relationship lived out in prayer is something He taught his disciples then and is teaching us now. God our Father loves us, hears our prayers and will give us good things.

Jesus goes on to ask the disciples, *"Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If 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?"*

So, if we, who are sinful, human creatures, know how to give our children good gifts when they ask, how much more will our heavenly Father give us, if we ask? But in the examples Jesus proposes in this gospel lesson, people are asking for what is immediate and mundane: three loaves of bread, a fish and an egg, all of which will quench hunger and sustain life on a physical level. But Jesus instructs us to pray, not only for daily bread, to fill our bellies and quench our thirst, but to pray persistently for what sustains our lives as His disciples, what equips and empowers us for life in the kingdom and for what God really wants to give us: the Holy Spirit.

Jesus teaches us to pray persistently that God would send the one who will lead and guide us in all we do, who will strengthen and encourage us in our decisions, who will continually nudge us into right relationship with God, who will call us back when we are pulled into those places and things that do not glorify God.

Prayer is a continual asking, seeking and knocking, within a loving relationship with God, a relationship that assures good gifts, the gift of the Holy Spirit. ***And without the Holy Spirit, there was not and there is not, a church!*** The Holy Spirit leads and empowers Jesus, and when the Holy Spirit comes to Jesus' followers, when the Holy Spirit comes to us, we are led and empowered to continue what Jesus began to do and to teach before He died and rose again. To share the good news of God's gracious and redeeming love, of His mercy and forgiveness. To share the joy of knowing that we serve a living God who never leaves us, who is always with us.

The Lord's Prayer given to us by Jesus the Christ is clearly a prayer for God's people gathered together in community, a prayer for the church, as prayer for us as His disciples. The language is we and us, not I and me. And in the prayer, the community's deepest desire is that God's kingdom come, that God's will be done. As you pulled into the parking lot this morning you must have noticed the view of our campus from Augusta Road. The gray house is gone. The land is open and seeded for new grass. You can see our front entrance and walkways. After years of persistent prayer and discernment about what to do in that space, the Holy Spirit led this congregation, together as the church, to clear that land for something else to come. What else might the Spirit lead us to do?

When something is important to us, we know how to be persistent.

Prayer is important to Jesus. What is important to us? Today's Gospel lesson can be a bit overwhelming, as it presents us with both gift and challenge. The gift of prayer and God's sending of the Holy Spirit, and the challenge to make intentional, persistent prayer a part of our daily lives. The challenge to spend as much time disciplining ourselves for prayer as we do for work, golf, school, dance, community service or whatever else we choose to make a priority in our life. The challenge to avoid the excuse that we don't have enough time, or the right words.

This Gospel lesson shows us that prayer is more than a release of feelings or emotions, it is a learned experience that involves discipline, practice and persistence, as Jesus said, pray this way. Prayer is not "putting coins in a vending machine." It is not putting our prayer in the right slot, pushing the right button, and waiting for the vending machine God to spit out exactly what we want. ***God is not a vending machine and prayer is not all about us!***

Prayer is a relationship, a relationship with the living God who created us, loves us, forgives and sustains us. And the good news is that the challenge to pray persistently for the gift of the Holy Spirit opens ***new life to us***. New life offered within the context of a relationship; a relationship of radical trust in God, and obedience to the way of Jesus Christ. But it seems even when we know this is true, even when we hear and believe the good news, we still ask, but Lord how do I pray?

And God, our loving parent, takes us in His arms and says, "Pray with persistence for the Holy Spirit. Pray and do not cease." And even still we question, "what if I do it wrong, what if I'm asking for too much or not the right thing, what if I'm not good enough, what if, what if, what if? We waste energy talking ourselves out of prayer, when we could be spending energy persistently praying. And sometimes we do pray, fervently even, for something very important, but when we pray and pray and what we're praying for doesn't seem to come about, we become hurt, angry and distant from God because we haven't gotten what we prayed for, what we wanted. So instead of being persistent in praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit to come lead and guide us, we abandon prayer all together. We stop talking to God. It's just easier than admitting our anger, our disappointment and fear in thinking God really doesn't hear us or hears and doesn't care.

One day in Seminary I was in one of my professor's office, in tears, sharing with him how angry I was about something that was happening in my life. He said to me, "Elise, you're angry at God aren't you?" I looked up quickly and said, "No of course not, I'm not mad at God."

But luckily my professor wasn't going to let me off the hook that easily. "You don't have to lie to me. You're angry at God and you're afraid to say it." After a bit of silence I admitted that yes I was angry with God, but I was afraid to say it aloud. Wasn't that wrong? To be mad at God? Then my professor said something I will never forget. "Elise, it's OK to tell God how you feel. He can handle it. He can handle your anger and your confusion. Talk to Him. He wants to talk to you, to have a relationship where you can share everything, even your deepest anger. It's when you stop talking to Him that you have a problem."

From that day on I viewed prayer differently. I began to see it as a conversation with God. Not something I had to say or do right, not just a time to ask for things I wanted or even needed, but time spent with God, in conversation, sharing my thoughts, my prayers, my fears, my needs and even my wants.

We all spend time talking to our spouse, children, friends and neighbors, building up those important relationships. Well, God wants that with us, too. He wants to be in relationship with us, to talk with us, to walk with us, to lead and to guide us, to give us good gifts, to give us new life!

When something is important to us, we know how to be persistent. Prayer is important to Jesus and He is persistent in prayer.

He teaches us to pray persistently and tells us that if we ask it will be given, search and we will find, knock and the door will be opened. Maybe not the way we want, or in the time we expect, but in God's own good time, in His own good will, He will give us good gifts, the gift of the Holy Spirit, if we only ask.

I pray this day that we may each grow in prayerful persistence, seeking God's good gifts. Amen.