

Message: "Praiseworthy Persistence"

Scripture Lesson: Luke 11:1-13

11He 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!"

I must have asked God a thousand times to help stop the war in Ukraine - but it goes on.

I think I've asked God a thousand times to show us how to do children's Sunday School and Youth Group in the times of Covid - but still we don't have either program operating well.

I have to have asked God a thousand times to work on our present political climate, with partisanship running amok, and absolutely juvenile falsehoods like the Big Lie still being accepted - but there are still those who absolutely believe in things that have been categorically and empirically disproven.

I'm asking God daily to help us deal with climate change - but temperatures keep rising, and science keeps being denied.

I've asked God regularly for a decrease in mass shootings and gun violence - but we are killing ourselves more frequently than ever.

I've been asking God for thirty years to heal our denomination from its tendency to exclude those who are LGBTQ from full membership - and we're still not there.

I've been praying to God for a lot of things over many years, things that I think God wants too, and yet they don't materialize; sometimes, it seems like we're going completely backwards from the way things ought to be.

Which begs a natural question in my mind: SHOULD I STOP PRAYING?

I think we know the answer to that question, don't we?

If we're uncertain, if we wonder if prayer changes anything, if we question God's responsiveness to our hurting world, we are in good company. Jesus was

sharing a teaching with his disciples, who I think Jesus sensed were concerned about prayer - whether it did any good or not, what to ask for, how to approach God, what to share with the divine. Jesus gave them what is also familiar to us - the Lord's prayer. This is the template for all prayers in a sense, for it prevails upon God for the things that keep us going, keep us on track, keep us centered upon the things that keep life the valuable thing it is. In other words, the prayer life that Jesus advocates is what enables us to be persistent in life, for prayer is not about changing God -- it is about changing us. Let me go a little further with this fine point - prayer is not about changing God, but changing how we exist in our context, how we orient ourselves in this life.

The Lord's prayer is exactly that - a prayer of orientation for the one who speaks it from the heart. The beginning of the prayer, "Hallowed be thy name," is a somewhat ancient way of turning life and heart and soul towards the divine, to make sure one is trying to pay full attention to God. The ultimate hope, "Thy Kingdom come," re-affirms an alignment of the soul with God's will, both in this world and beyond. "Give us our daily bread" is petitionary in nature, but aligns with the promise of God's provision to give us what we need for life (please hear the distinction between what we NEED and what we WANT); the plea for forgiveness is attached to our own willingness to forgive, another orienting aspect of the prayer. Lastly, the petition to guard us from temptation is the invitation of the divine to help maintain our alignment with what is right and what is true - a collaborative venture from the get-go, for God can never help anyone who refuses to open their heart.

The Lord's prayer reflects a powerful truth: it is from a life properly oriented towards God that grace can do its best work - although much of the world would not recognize it as such. For the grace of God works according to God's ways, which function on a scale of eternity and a dimension of all-inclusiveness - in other words, grace is in it for the long haul. Like love, and humility, and compassion, and justice, and all the principles and virtues that make life worth living, grace is a steady thing, a consistent thing, a dependable thing, offered to all who allow God into their lives. Who truly invite God into their lives. Who give God the reigns of control over all of their lives. Who do not insist on getting their own way, but insist on God getting God's way. None of these are easy things to do in this world of competing motivations, but the pathway of faith makes it clear that orientation towards God is the only pathway that serves this life fully, and provides for all that lies beyond this life eternally.

I found a quote from the Editors of the Christian Century that I liked regarding how we understand the Lord's prayer, or, for that matter, any prayer that searches for God: "The Lord's Prayer is not about us, however, but about God. Thy kingdom come. To pray this prayer is to orient our lives toward God and not ourselves, toward God's will and not our own. The prayer is a way of stating our allegiance to God rather than to the political, economic or cultural powers of this world. We pray for the wisdom to see where God's reign is already breaking into this world and for the courage and strength to align ourselves with it."

So, we are encouraged to be persistent in prayer; but we must realize that the result of honest prayer is to, in turn, make us persistent in a world of impatience. We are counseled by Jesus to continue to ask for what is needed, what is right and just and fair and healthy and life-worthy; we are to saturate our wait for the answers with efforts to produce what is needed, to do what is right, to further justice, to gain a better balance for our living and that of others. Jesus says to seek out the God who lives in us, who lives in others, who lives in this world; seek until you find a glimpse, a morsel, a glint of the divine in another, in yourself, in the world, in creation, and you will need no further motivation to keep looking. Knock on the doors of other homes, of other minds, of other ideas, of other opinions, but knock in the manner of grace, open to the possibilities God wishes to share between us all. Be persistent in your faith especially when it is hard, when others bail out on God, when churches vote to secede, when theologies run amok, when angry voices challenge your belief in unconditional love, generous compassion, determined forgiveness, intentional service, and the pursuit of God's sense of justice for the world - for these are all things of an eternal nature which shall not be taken away, and will bear out the test of time.

In other words, be persistent in your prayers. Remember that persistence is what prayer is about. Not simple answers, not magical solutions, not fixing this world in a flash of lightning. Prayer is about staying power in a world of chaos and flux; prayer is about alignment with what is steady in the midst of the human hurricanes we create for ourselves; prayer is about constantly, continually, regularly, and determinedly sharing our lives with God, that God may share God's life with us. Prayer is about shifting focus from ourselves towards God, and to discover how God's focus has always been upon us.