

Knock, Knock!

July 17, 2016 Luke 10:38-42

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Knock knock....(Jesus)

Knock knock....(Luke)

I love jokes and riddles. Love to try to figure out a riddle...love to play 20 questions. All that. But do you ever feel like prayer is a knock knock joke, a riddle? I know I have felt that way.

Confused by what prayer IS, certainly confused by what it DOES, sometimes wondering WHY we pray! This may be the one topic pastors get more than any other...how should I pray? Or the statement that always makes me sad...'your prayers are better than mine, pastor'....and maybe we come by some of those feelings from gospels like today's where even the disciples say 'Teach us to pray.'

Today we hear Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. That's right, like lots of things in the Gospels, there are different versions of the Lord's Prayer. One is not better than the other. But Matthew's version is longer, more fleshed out, and the one used by most any church I've come in contact with. Both cover the same basics, which can be boiled down to 'give us, forgive us, lead us, deliver us.' Both versions start by addressing God in God's character; God is holy and God is overseer of a Kingdom that we still wait for. Both versions provide a wonderful outline of what to pray.

And then we hear an odd story about a man who needs bread in the middle of the night. He's got unexpected out of towers knocking on HIS door. But his family finished off the last crumbs of bread at supper earlier that evening. The cupboards are bare. And in the ancient world, this was a terrible embarrassment. Hospitality was crucial in that world, and it was governed by a strict set of expectations. One being that when guests arrive, you put food on the table immediately! With no 24 hour grocery store to run to, no late night pizza delivery to call in a pinch, what's a good host to do? Well he goes to his neighbor, and knocks on HIS door. Now, I'm pretty sure my neighbors would have the same response the guy in the story; GO AWAY! Don't you know what time it is? This neighbor has no intention of getting out of his warm cozy bed because his neighbor is unprepared.

But Jesus says, don't fret. He will indeed give the man the bread he needs. But not because they are friends. No he will give the loaves of bread because of the boldness or shamelessness, or the persistence of the asker. The neighbor does not give the man the bread because he persistently is knocking. Although that does make a lot of sense to me, thinking the guy got up just to get rid of the racket and inconvenience of the guy at the door. But if we take that interpretation, then its an easy jump to think God gives us what we need just to get rid of our constant chatter....and that's not the God I know! Because the man is so bold and shameless to ask for what he needs, the neighbor will give him 'whatever he needs'.

Now, the emphasis is on need. Because in the ancient world, this man really did NEED that bread. It wasn't just that he wanted to make a good impression on his late night arrivals. But to live up to the codes of hospitality, he needed that bread... and so did the visitors! And Jesus tells us it's the same for us. What do we need? Ask for it! You will receive it. Search for it. You will find it! Knock on the door and it will open for you. 'For everyone who asks receives, and

everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.' Jesus makes it sound so simple, so formulaic....right?

But if you are like me, you have asked for things...persistently....over and over...and not gotten them. You have searched for something....meaning, freedom, liberation, health...and not gotten it. You have knocked on God's door until your knuckles are raw....and the door seems jammed shut. It feels like God has hung a 'Gone Fishing' sign outside the doors of heaven....not to be seen or heard from in a long long time. Therein is one of the riddles of prayer for me.

Jesus tells us here in this text to be bold, be shameless. Ask for what you need. So what do we do with the silence that can answer us back? There are lots of pat answers out there that I don't buy at all. God answers all prayers....just that the answer is no sometimes. Doesn't cut it for me. Sure, some prayers need a 'no'...that pony you might still be praying for every Christmas. But please bring peace to the distraught regions of the world God....NO. That doesn't work.

But if I read all the way to the end of this text, the final sentence, I find a truth, a deep and important truth. "If you then, who are wicked, 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!" Hmmm....could it be that what we need....in all circumstances, in all situations, is the Holy Spirit? Is Jesus telling us to ask for and seek the Holy Spirit? That the one thing God knows we need, the one thing, is the Holy Spirit....because the Spirit is what will sustain us in times of trial, the Spirit is what will fill us in times of want, the Spirit will dance with us in moments of joy. When I ask for peace and it doesn't seem forth coming, the Spirit encourages me, keeps me in the game, shows me glimpses of peace peaking through. The Spirit gives me hope to keep on going.

This is the gift, the Spirit, that is given to all who ask. It is not about what we want, or even what we think we need, but what God knows we need; God's self. Yes, to those who seek and knock and ask....what is given is God. What a personal gift! This is what prayer is to me. Prayer is the intimate relationship between two lovers. Prayer is really just a fancy word for 'divine talk' or 'God communications'. I love nothing better than sitting down with Scott, or my dearest friend Betsy, or my longest friend Susie....and chatting on and on. To Scott and Betsy and Susie I can pour out every thought, every feeling, every disappointment, every joy, every dream, every fear. When I do that, I know they cannot fix every struggle in my heart, I know they don't have magic wands to heal me or strengthen me. I even know that what I say may sometimes be difficult or harsh for them to hear.

But they love me and so they are more than willing to give me what I need....the gift of themselves. The gift of presence. The gift of knowing I am not in this alone. And so it is with prayer. I sit down with my dearest friend God, and I pour out my soul. I share my expectations and my desires. I unburden my heart. I talk about all of those on our prayer list, I bring up special considerations. I celebrate my joys and weep with my gratitudes. And my expectation is that God will share the Spirit with me. That God will pour the Spirit into my heart, that God gives God's very self to me. And then with that gift, I am fortified to face whatever other needs I have in my life.

The thing with prayer is that it is relationship. And relationships don't happen at all once, and they certainly are not maintained well if we only occasionally 'get together.' Relationships take time to foster, they take consistency, they take persistence if you will! All of the great saints and

mystics throughout the ages speak to the need to pray often and regularly, daily. They tell us that consistent prayer is necessary to be able to get to understand and know how God shows up in the relationship. They all tell us silence....every day....is necessary. That silence might come from sitting in a prayer room, coming to the sanctuary in silence, a walk along the lake shore, a hike through the arboretum. The key is a time of silence devoted to being with God every day. It is just the same that I devote to being with Scott every day, to face timing with Betsy two or three times a week, calling Susie on the phone at least once a week. Being there.

The thing is, God desires nothing more than to be in relationship with us and this entire text today is a loving affirmation of that. The text is invitation after invitation to be in relationship with the Divine. To ask, to seek, to knock. That's a pretty heady thing! It testifies to God's heart and deep desire to know us and to give God's self to us. Today's reading tells us it is NOT about how you pray, but that you do it. That by doing it you maintain your relationship with God. That by persistence that relationship grows and deepens and develops as the years go by.

And by doing it, over and over every day, we are strengthened for those times when we cannot pray. This winter and spring I found myself in that situation. I was reminded often of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the beloved leader of the Chicago archdiocese who died from cancer in 1996. He shared his experience of prayer and illness in his memoir *The Gift of Peace*. He cautioned that illnesses may strike that prevent us from our own prayer. He told of his inability to pray in the depths of his illness due to his pain. His faith was firm and strong, but he could not focus to pray. But his years of persistent prayer prior to his illness carried him through that period. You might say he and God simply sat together in the silence of love through that time. His inner peace was visible to all and he modeled a dying from this world that was filled with dignity and even joy. All cultivated through a rich and persistent prayer life.

Jesus uses prayer throughout Luke's gospel to maintain his relationship with God. He prays with people but also often goes off on his own to pray. He realizes his need for God. He asks and seeks God. He knocks on God's door over and over. And like the Cardinal, his deep inner connection with God allowed him to accept the cross and the events that would turn the world upside down.

Knock knock, God....it's us....can we sit and chat with you? Amen.