

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
Psalm 85  
Luke 11:1-13

First United Church of Christ, Northfield  
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July 29, 2007

### Talking to God

When people come to the United Church of Christ from one of the liturgical traditions (Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran), one of the things that they say they miss is reciting familiar words over and over again every week. We trace our roots to what is called the “Free Church” tradition – which means, among other things, that our words do not come from a prayer book or missal; consequently, there are many fewer passages so familiar to us that we can say them from memory.

The key exception to that is the Lord’s Prayer, or as we say in the bulletin, the Prayer of our Savior. (The other exception is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and we’ll save that for another day). We say the prayer every Sunday in worship, and I believe that many of us include it in our daily prayers as well. We are very persistent in the praying of this prayer.

And indeed, persistence seems to be the virtue that Jesus highlights when he teaches this prayer to his disciples. He tells this curious story about going to neighbor to ask for some bread for unexpected guests. What is curious about it is that the neighbor refuses at first, and finally relents – not out of affection or even out of good manners – but because of the persistence of the one asking.

We, of course, assume that we are the person with a need and that God is the neighbor we are asking for help. It is not very inspiring to hear that God responds only to get us to stop our entreaties.

It helps to understand this story if we recognize that this story has a particular form that was familiar to people in the first century. The form goes like this: If even an unworthy person would act in a particular way, then it follows that a worthy person could also be counted on to act in that way. So, if a sleepy and quarrelsome neighbor could be persuaded to help a friend, how much more would God be willing to help? Jesus uses this same form later in the passage: *“Is there anyone among you who, if you 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? ...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* [Luke 11:11-13]

The point, however, is not the form of the story, but the issue of persistence. What brings the bread to the householder with guests is not the brilliance of the argument, not the depth of the friendship between them, not the seriousness of the need; it is the persistence. We are, it seems, being taught that persistence is a key virtue of prayer.

Modern American life, at least the way most of us live it, does not leave a lot of room for persistence. We have become accustomed to visual images that are complex and rapidly changing, whether on television or in the movies. What we hear is also intense,

varied, and rapidly changing. Persistence consistently loses out to variety; our attention spans are short, and probably getting shorter.

Except for this prayer, which we keep on praying. We pray it so often, in fact, that we sometimes just run the words together in one long memorized stream. If we get interrupted in the middle, maybe we can't get started again without going back to the beginning. That's not necessarily a bad thing, by the way – there are lots of things we learn that way – multiplication tables, for example. We learn them by rote when we are young, and may not really understand them until we are much farther along in our mathematical educations. So also with this prayer: we learn it, we say it, maybe even we treasure it, but we don't examine it very often. We are startled into reflection when we speak a different version, as we do from time to time, or when we encounter Luke's brief and spare version in this morning's text.

*“Father, hallowed be your name.”* Jesus begins by addressing and honoring God. This is not unlike the beginning of many conversations and social interactions (though it is somewhat different from the form of first-century epistles, which begin with the name of the one writing, not the one written to).

*“Your kingdom come.”* These three words carry a powerful testimony: that God's kingdom is different from our human ways of life, and that we look with hope to the coming of God's shalom.

*“Give us each day our daily bread.”* This, too, a powerful testimony to our dependence upon God for everything, symbolized by the food we need each day. It speaks of a faith anchored in today, not in the events of the past nor even of the hopes for the future: give us each day ...

*“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.”* Here, in the heart of this prayer, is the matter of forgiveness – whether we use the language of debts, trespassers, or sins. Forgiveness is identified here as being an obligation as well as a request. Further, there is the introduction of a holy obligation: that we are to be like God insofar as forgiveness is concerned. Our prayer is about our actions as well as about God's.

*“And do not bring us to the time of trial.”* This has always seemed to me to be the most problematic line in the prayer, because it implies that God might choose to put trials in our way. Trials, I would argue, more often come because of human action than because of divine intervention. Still, there are some trials that come from God, even a loving and compassionate God: we are called to be more than we believe we can be. But to be honest, this sentence in the prayer is a thoroughly human one, speaking more to our longing than to any particular theological understanding of how God works in the world.

Luke does not include the words of praise that we are familiar with at the end of this prayer (neither does the version in the Gospel of Matthew [Matthew 6:9], for that matter). What Jesus gives us is more an outline of prayer than a prayer itself.

And yet we keep saying it. We say it with the fervor of the ancient psalmist: *“Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. ...The Lord will give what is good ...”* [Psalm 85, 7, 12] We say it dutifully, we say it (sometimes) perfunctorily. And we keep saying it.

And so we follow Jesus’ teaching, not only in the words that he gave us, but also in the context of the story that he gave us with the words. We are to be persistent in prayer.

I have been working the last few weeks on the plan for my upcoming sabbatical. I have organized the plan in two parts: the projects I will undertake and the processes I will use to support and accomplish them. The first of those processes that I listed was prayer. And when I looked back at the plan for my 2002 sabbatical, I found that prayer was at the top of that list, too. I tell you this, not so that you will worry about my prayer life, but as an illustration of how difficult it can be – even for a professional – to maintain a persistent and healthy prayer life. I have recently been experimenting with praying in visual ways – focusing on works of art, using music to deepen my involvement in prayer, even doodling as I reflect on the persons and situations that are on my prayer list. In the end, of course, the way to spend more time speaking to God is to spend more time speaking to God – making it a primary rather than a secondary part of the day. This is why, after all, they are called spiritual disciplines ..

It is clear, from the way that Jesus tells the story, that we who pray are like the man who asks his neighbor for bread, and that God is the perfect version of the neighbor – the one who always gives us what we truly need and ask for. Still, I invite you to take a moment to turn this story on its head, and to consider what it would teach us if God were the pleader and we were the person already in bed and reluctant to get up and help. God teaches us persistence, after all, by God’s own persistence. As a friend and colleague told me as I was discerning my vocation as an ordained minister: “The hound of heaven is after you, and will not let go until you find your calling.” God’s persistence in speaking to us becomes grace, and our persistence in speaking to God becomes prayer.

Amen.

Prayer for July 29, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

Holy One, we offer our prayers this morning for everyone who is called to leadership.

We ask your blessing on those who are leaders in our own congregation: those who have set aside time from their other responsibilities and recreation to work on behalf of this community of faith. We thank you for their attention to the people, programs, resources, and structures that make up our life together.

We ask your blessing, too, on the leaders of our Minnesota Conference, and especially on our Conference Ministers: Karen Smith-Sellers, Judith Youngman, and Howie Tobak. We remember John Thomas, the President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ, and all those who bring their skills to the needs of the wider church.

We pray this morning for the leaders of business and industry, that they may exercise their authority for the benefit of their employees and customers, as well as for their stockholders and investors. Give to them the gifts of imagination, integrity, and daring, so that we may all share a vigorous economic life together.

God of all learning, we pray also for educational leaders – those women and men who oversee schools, academies, colleges, and universities. Help them to create communities in which learning is shared freely and energetically, where different gifts and styles of learning are honored and accounted for.

Lord of all the nations, we thank you, too, for those who have undertaken to lead us in civic and governmental positions. We are grateful for the sacrifices they make in order to serve; help us to repay this debt by participating honorably in public life. Keep our debates focused on issues rather than persons, and keep our concerns focused on the most vulnerable rather than the most powerful.

All these things we ask in the name of the one who taught us that all leaders are first servants, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...