

7 Pentecost Luke 11:1-13
Christ and Grace July 28, 2019
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There is *nothing* more persistent than a child. Even if you do not happen to have one, you know this. You have come upon them in the grocery store or in Wal Mart, begging their parents for some desperately wanted item. At first they are polite, cute even. Then they begin to rationalize and bargain. When all else fails they simply have a meltdown right in the middle of the aisle, totally unconcerned that complete strangers are witness to their behavior, and totally unconcerned about their parents' embarrassment! I'm dating myself now, but back when cigarettes were displayed in the checkout lane, I once saw a 2 year old have a fit when her Mama would not give her a pack of cigarettes!

Parents try to give their children what they need, which is not always what they want. This is never an easy task, especially when they are melting down in the aisle at Wal Mart! As we raise our children we come to know them and to know what they need most. We come to know what will help them and what will harm them because of the relationship we have with them. The persistence of a child will wear us down at times, and tantrums in public are not a good thing, but there is something about persistence that is good, because in their persistence, children are learning the nuances between want and need, between what is good and not good, healthy and harmful. Our hope as parents is that they grow in the wisdom to know the difference.

It is this word, persistence, which has caught my attention all week as I spent time with the Gospel. Jesus did not raise children. How could he possibly know how persistent a 4 year old can be? But Jesus *did* have disciples.

Jesus had disciples and followers who always wanted something. Let's backtrack just a little to illustrate this. A few weeks ago we heard about the lawyer who wanted to know how to have eternal life and then even more persistently, he wanted Jesus to tell him exactly who his neighbor was. Then last week, Martha wanted Jesus to meet her needs. She wanted some help from her sister, and she demanded that Jesus intervene. In today's passage the disciples can hardly wait for Jesus to finish praying because they want him to teach *them* how to pray. The disciples had observed that Jesus was able to do many amazing things, that Jesus showed remarkable wisdom, self-control and peace in the midst of all the challenges to his ministry. And the disciples wanted some of that!

How are we like those disciples and followers of Jesus? I think we can all admit that we can be persistent about what we want – and most of the time we can be *politely* persistent. But how do we know that what we want is what we really need? Are we being persistent for our own personal agendas or are we being persistent for God's agenda - for our kingdom, or for the Kingdom of God? And how often do we confuse the two?

Jesus' personal agenda was God's agenda, his Kingdom was God's kingdom, and the prayer that he gave them toward that end is the one we know by heart and pray often. And yet, The Lord's Prayer, in all its simplicity, can make prayer seem deceptively easy. Because, if you think about it, we often pray this prayer by rote – we say the words, but are we praying them? Or we pray it

because we know it and it suffices when we are not sure how to pray or what to pray, when we feel inadequate, or cannot find the right words.

We still want Jesus or someone to teach us how to pray. Witness the number of books written on prayer. And if we are not trying to learn how to pray, we are busy avoiding prayer all together. Because sometimes things we'd rather not deal with bubble up when we get still and try to pray. And praying out loud in public? Plenty of us avoid that too!

When I was in seminary I took a class on the theology of prayer, hoping I could get a grip on this whole prayer thing, but after reading volumes written by the early church fathers on The Lord's Prayer alone, I left that class no wiser than I entered it on exactly *how* to pray. But I did learn something *about* prayer. I learned that there are many ways to pray – from silent prayer, to walking meditations on a labyrinth, prayer beads, body prayers; on Wednesday I witnessed that taking lunches to a group of youth working hard to improve our community is a very good way to pray – indeed this happened every day last week as people from Christ and Grace took lunches to this group. On Friday I learned that even slicing a bowl of peaches can become a prayer.

I now suspect that Jesus gave the disciples The Lord's Prayer as a guideline for prayer, as a starting point for deeper prayer. So I am learning ways to take each phrase of this prayer and meditate on it, applying it to whatever is going on in my life or in the world at any particular time. This can be powerful.

For instance, how does The Lord's Prayer sound when applied to the deep bitterness surrounding the disagreements on how best to solve the immigration problem? How does it sound when we pray it alongside issues of global warming, human sexuality, and healthcare reform? How do we pray it in the context of a divorce, an unexpected diagnosis, or an unrealized expectation?

In all of these life events are we praising God with the words "hallowed be thy name"? Are we calling for the coming of God's Kingdom, God's will be done, and not our own personal agendas? Are we asking for the daily bread we truly need and not for what we envy or selfishly want for ourselves? Are we being as forgiving as we are seeking to be forgiven? And then, what is it that we are learning from our trials - and are we being drawn closer to God through them? It is one thing to pray The Lord's Prayer. It is another thing to live it.

Most likely this powerful prayer from Jesus caused the disciples some anxiety. And as we noted a few weeks ago, Jesus likes to tell stories when people get anxious. And that is just what Jesus does! In the parable of the friend at midnight, the friend is persistent, reminding his friend, and us, that we are to be neighbors to one another even in the middle of the night (especially in the middle of someone's night). The truth is, we are as likely to be the neighbor in need as we are to be the one who would rather not be disturbed from the sleep of complacency and it is good to remember that.

And then Jesus tells the disciples to ask, search, and knock. These are words of action; they suggest that responsibility rests not only on God to answer our prayers but also on us to take persistent action to bring about God's Kingdom. Then finally, we are back to parenting! As he tells the story of what a good father does for his children, Jesus assures the disciples that God is

the good and wise parent who knows what the children need. God knows what will help us and what will harm us.

What if we were as persistent about being in God's presence, however we pray, as our children are in seeking our attention? Life's many distractions can divert our attention and make persistence in prayer difficult. But it is only in the praying, in the communion with God, that our relationship grows. Only in a close relationship can we come to know all that God desires for us. Only then will we know that what we are asking for is what God desires for us. Being in the presence of Jesus, whether in silent prayer, out in the world as we work to bring about the kingdom, or here, sharing in the Eucharist – it's *all* prayer. Amen.