

July 28, 2013 Proper 12C Luke 11:1-13

Do you ever feel a little guilty about your prayer life – worried that you don't pray enough, or that your prayer isn't really the right kind of prayer? Do you sometimes think that there are other people out there who pray really, really well, but you don't really have the knack? These are SO common in the Christian life, at least in our society. If you're not in that category, it's probably for one of two reasons: first, you don't pray much and you don't worry about it, and to that I'd say you are missing out on a vital part of life, and maybe missing the boat entirely in terms of spiritual life. Or you may feel comfortable with your prayers and know that God hears you whether they are perfect or not, for which you should give a little prayer of gratitude right this second, because it's not all that common.

There's actually a third subset, those who aren't entirely sure there's anybody listening. And those people are perhaps the ones today's Gospel really speaks to the most.

Today, Jesus talks about prayer, and there are three sections of the Gospel, each of which could be the source of a sermon by itself.

First, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray; then he tells a wonderful parable about persistence in prayer, and third, he wraps it up by telling us what he has meant by all of that in the lovely passage, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be open to you."

I've told you one of my family's favorite stories before, and it's particularly relevant to the parable of the neighbor asking for bread in the middle of the night. Although I've never been very fond of shopping for clothing and things like that, I've always enjoyed grocery shopping. In fact, I go into a sort of reverie – I think my husband knows by now that I seldom just "run to the store" – I'm likely to wander the aisles and end up with a basketful. My son Luke and I were once in the produce section of Murphy's Market, our neighborhood grocery store. I was examining various kinds of produce, in my grocery shopping sort of trance state, when I realized that Luke, who was about 4 years old, had been saying, over and over again, "Mom, can I have a peach? Mom, can I have a peach? Mom, can I have a peach?" I sort of shook myself to attention and looked up; I had learned to tune out my children's

incessant chatter, but I realized that there were a few other people in the produce section who certainly hadn't! So I said to the few people standing there, "Gee, I guess I'd better answer him for the sake of you other shoppers." At that, a man nearby said, "Yeah, I was getting ready to buy the kid a peach myself!"

I'm sure Luke got his peach. To this day, if I'm a little inattentive, either one of my grown sons is likely to say, "Mom, can I have a peach?"

Just as in the parable, my silence was saying to Luke, "Do not bother me," but, to paraphrase the Gospel, "I tell you, even though I would not buy Luke a peach because he is my son, at least because of his persistence I would wake up and give him the peach he wanted."

Actually, more than one translator adds the word "shameless," feeling that "shameless persistence" is the more appropriate translation.

To segue a little here, when Bob Betty – who's hiding back there playing the organ so nicely – came by earlier this week, he brought a few articles he got off the internet. Both are by Andrea Palpant

Dilley, a young woman in her early 30s who blogs about young adults and the church. One of them is entitled, "A safe place to doubt," and she quotes statistics saying that one of the top reasons young people quit going to church is that they see the church as unfriendly to those who doubt. "We aren't looking for a faith that provides all the answers," one of the young people said. "We're looking for one in which we are free to ask the questions."

That's an important point for every congregation these days to hear really well: young people want to bring their doubts to church, but it at least seems to them that they are the only doubters, and that their doubt is somehow threatening to all the other people.

At least in our church, and most Episcopal churches I've ever attended, that is very far from the truth, but it doesn't really matter. What matters is the perception that everybody else believes uniformly, prays uniformly, and insists on uniformity in others. I can see where that misunderstanding could arise even in this community, where I've heard many people bring their questions and talk about their doubts. During church services, most of us look from the outside as though everything makes perfect sense to us,

that all the doctrine and theology and practice is second nature to us and we confidently accept every bit of it. But that's not really true of anybody I know well.

And Jesus himself seems to be opening the door for doubters. Why on earth would we need to be persistent in prayer if we knew without a doubt that God heard us the first time? My son Luke knew that his mom would undoubtedly buy him a peach – after all, it wasn't a bag of candy he wanted! But he knew without a doubt that a little repetition was necessary, and it worked!

With God, repetition probably isn't necessary. One of my favorite old-time Bible commentators, William Barclay, doesn't believe the parable is about persistence in prayer – he says Jesus is making a comparison of human behavior to God's behavior. But I don't really agree – the parable is so prominent that I think Jesus is saying, "Just keep on praying. God can handle it. Keep on knocking. And eventually, you will receive what you have been seeking."

Just in case there are any doubters here who don't think the church can handle doubt, let's clarify, because sometimes people don't get what they want, and to them that's proof that prayer

doesn't work. I don't think that Jesus is saying that we can get anything we want by praying frequently. Jesus is suggesting a certain form of prayer – praise God, then ask for God's kingdom to be present for the world – you could put a full stop right there, and if you really meant it that could be your prayer for your entire life – but he goes on to say that we can also ask for our daily needs and forgiveness and respite from serious trials.

Jesus is suggesting that we persist in prayer, that somehow it changes our hearts and minds and entire beings and makes us ready to receive what God has in store for us. It's not immunity from pain or trouble, but the promise that we can have the peace of God through all our pain and trouble. It's not that particular job or house or spouse or accomplishment – it's the promise that if we're walking in God's kingdom – which is always present if we know where to look for it – we'll have something far more valuable than the job or house or spouse or accomplishment we think will make us permanently happy.

If you're interested in reading a good, short and extremely entertaining book about prayer, try Anne LaMott's [Help, Thanks,](#)

Wow: The Three Essential Prayers. I don't agree with 100% of her perspective, but she opens up the idea of prayer in a way that is quite unique to her. I loved one of her quotes so much I posted it on Facebook:

"If you told me you had said to God, "It is all hopeless, and I don't have a clue if You exist, but I could use a hand," it would almost bring tears to my eyes, tears of pride in you, for the courage it takes to get real— really real. It would make me want to sit next to you at the dinner table."

Once when I was in Baltimore I did a baptism, and the baby's aunt, probably in her early 20s, was supposed to be one of the sponsors. We went through the service, the parts where we say things like, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?" and "Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?" at which the sponsors answer, "I do," and "I renounce them." This young woman took me aside after our baptism seminar and said, "I don't know if I can say those things. I want to be a Christian – I hope I'll be a Christian some day – but right now I just don't know if I believe all those things, and I don't want to say something I don't really believe."

Strange as it may sound, you can't imagine how happy I was to hear her say that! I was happy because I had done lots of baptisms, and often I got the sense that the college roommate or sibling or best friend from childhood knew very little about Christianity, was not a practicing Christian in any sense of the word, maybe didn't even believe any of it, yet there they were, making promises that I knew at least some of them would never, ever think about again. This young woman had incredible integrity, and I told her I thought she'd make a great spiritual model for her little niece: she was seeking, and hadn't found what she was seeking for so far, but she intended to keep looking and in the meantime wasn't willing to say something patently untrue. I invited her to stand up there and be part of the ceremony, but not be an official sponsor and say things she didn't believe.

Each of us has a capacity for prayer, even amidst our doubts. God can handle our doubts – just read a few Psalms and see what doubt can look like! – but Jesus promises us that if we persist, we will receive an answer. Just knock, and knock, and keep knocking.