

May 19, 2013
Pentecost Sunday

The National Presbyterian Church

More Power to You

Luke 11:5-13

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In most of our sermons through the spring and summer we're looking together at the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ in stories that he loved to tell that we call "parables." These are stories with a spiritual meaning, with spiritual significance.

- Sometimes they are absolutely clear and simple; Jesus tells the story and the lights go on and people understand something that they never did understand clearly before.
- And sometimes these stories are more complicated; Jesus' followers, those who are listening to the stories, interact with Jesus and say "Jesus, we don't understand what you're saying. Please explain this to us." And in this interaction they find a relationship being built between them and Jesus through which they begin to discover spiritual truth which is not always easy to understand. But this happens – this growth in understanding and in relationship with Jesus – when they ask that question, when they follow-up in a way that they wouldn't have done otherwise.

So Jesus loves to tell these stories that he calls parables. Within our scripture reading today there are two of these particular stories, two stories that Jesus tells with a spiritual meaning, and the context is the subject of prayer. In Luke 11, Jesus has just taught his disciples the prayer that we call the Lord's Prayer (Jesus may have taught this prayer to his disciples on a number of different occasions – see Matthew 6) and then he goes on to tell two parables about the subject of prayer.

The first of those parables, the first of those two stories, is about two friends. They live in the same community as each other and its night time. And in the middle of the night one of the friends has a guest, a visitor, come to his house. In the ancient world, as in some societies today, hospitality is right at the top of your moral responsibility. No matter when somebody comes to you, you must be hospitable.

So he wants to welcome this person in but there's nothing in the house. There is no food in the house and he's at a loss. So in the middle of the night despite the fact it might be dangerous outside he welcomes the guest, leaves the house, goes to find a friend and knocks on the door of the friend's house. The door is locked for the night, but he knocks on it anyway, and calls out (remember, there's no glass in the windows!) saying, "I need your help; I need three loaves of bread." To which the friend replies from the inside (he doesn't unlock the door, from the inside he says), "Don't bother me. We're all asleep. The children have gone to bed. Go away." So there's no help in sight. Jesus doesn't quite finish the story at that point, he does that a moment or two later, but he certainly lets us know that the man standing on the outside knocking, who is told "No!", doesn't accept "no" for an answer. He keeps on knocking. He keeps saying that he needs help: "Help me out." He keeps on knocking, knocking, knocking, until, out of frustration,

the person on the inside says “All right, not because I am your friend but just because you are bugging me, I’m going to give you what you want.” And that’s the first story which Jesus tells at first, the first of his two parables.

And then he goes on to tell the second story, and it’s a different kind of a story. It’s a story about a child and a parent. The child is hungry, needs some food; the child may want McDonald’s (or its ancient equivalent! a treat of some kind) but asks for something fairly reasonable and probably not very tasty – for some fish and some eggs. This is all that the child wants. It’s a reasonable request: they’re hungry and they ask for it. And Jesus points out that if a child asked a parent for food that was reasonable and really pretty good for them, and the parent responded by giving them something that was harmful, wouldn’t that be really strange? Wouldn’t that be really weird? If they ask for fish or for eggs and the parent gave them, let’s say, a live poisonous scorpion or a snake, we’d all roll our eyes and say “That’s really strange or sick! That will hurt the child, not help the child. A loving, healthy parent just wouldn’t do that kind of thing.” And that’s the second story.

In fact, those are the two stories that Jesus tells. And between the stories he explains what’s going on and the connection with prayer.

After the first of the two stories he says about prayer (thinking about the man knocking on the door and not quitting), “*Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives. And everyone who seeks finds. And everyone who knocks, for them the door is opened*” (Luke 11:9-10). And then he goes on to the second story. And he says about prayer, “*If you, though you are evil – well we’re a mixture of good and evil but compared to God who alone is Holy we are evil – if you though you are limited and you’re evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God our Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?*” (Luke 11:13) . . . how much more will the Heavenly Father give *the Holy Spirit* to those who ask?

There are three lessons that Jesus draws from these two stories that he tells. Three lessons about prayer, three lessons about our relationship with God.

And the first is this: from the story about the man knocking at the door and not quitting, Jesus is basically telling us that it’s okay to bother God. It’s okay to bug God. It’s okay to annoy God. Indeed, God likes it. When we are so persistent with God that it turns into something which is, well, almost annoying, God likes it! When was the last time you annoyed God? Or bugged God? When you were so persistent with God that you were afraid that God might almost be upset with you for doing it? Jesus says “that’s okay, and you will receive more than you can imagine when you enter into that kind of a discussion, that kind of a relationship with God.”

Earlier this year a man who was greatly influential in my life died. His name is Dr. Paul Achtemeier. He was my doctoral advisor - one of the great New Testament scholars in our country in the last 30 years or so. Dr. Achtemeier was very, very bright, and a great teacher. But for most people, though he was much loved, and students flocked to his classes, he was somewhat intimidating. On one occasion (seared in my memory!) I was the brunt of the intimidation. It was during a seminar on Greek translation (which was intimidating enough in and of itself!). There were about a dozen of us there, trying to translate a passage from the Greek New Testament. We each took our turn around the circle and then I was on deck: it was my turn to translate this passage. I was doing okay as I translated, but, as the custom

was, Dr Achtemeier stopped me at a particular Greek word and asked for more details about the word: what was it doing here? What part of speech was it? Was it singular or plural? He wanted me to analyze it.

So I look at the word and I'm scared to death as I answer him. And I answer by way of a tentative kind of a question – I say, “Well, does it mean this? Is it in the accusative? And is it singular? And he looked at me and, with a deadpan face said, “I ask the questions!” At which point everybody in the room shrank, looking at me as if to say “thank goodness it's you and not me in the line of fire!” (for good reason, Dr Achtemeier was nick-named Bullet Bud!). I managed, somehow, to pull myself together and said more forcefully what I thought it meant, what part of speech it was. And he said, “yes!” and then moved on.

For most students, this was as far as they got in their relationship with their professor! Knowing how intimidating he was they never pursued him beyond that. But because he was my doctoral advisor, as the months went by in different seminars I had to pursue him – and discovered something wonderful: that he liked it!! When I ventured out of my shell, and made some kind of a proposal or argument, he would say, “Tell me more. Follow your argument. Keep pursuing it.” And we (my fellow graduate students and I) did just that. Indeed, we discovered that from time to time when we pursued an idea he might even change his mind; beneath the gruff exterior he was humble enough to back down from a previous position he had held. He would praise us for a strong argument or an insightful thought. But we would never have discovered that, we would never have entered into that relationship, he would never have become my mentor in the same way, had we not pushed him beyond that initial intimidation.

Sometimes we are so intimidated with God that we don't wrestle with God. We don't keep knocking at that door. But God says through Jesus that this is how we are to treat God, yes, even “Almighty God.” And that's why he tells this story and that's why he adds “*Ask, and you'll receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.*”

I actually did learn a little Greek from Dr Achtemeier! Those verbs, ask, seek, knock, are all in what we call the “continuous present” – they mean, “ask and keep on asking; seek and keep on seeking; knock and keep on knocking,” make it a continuous part of your life and you'll be amazed at the result, at what will happen in your relationship with God, and in the requests that you make to God.

But it's not, says Jesus (and this is his second point) as if you'll always get everything that you want. God is not like that.

In the second story Jesus tells us that God is like a parent who knows what we need even when we don't know what we need. “How weird it would be,” says Jesus, “if a child was asking just for some food, good stuff, and the parent gave bad stuff, a scorpion or a snake.” No, implies Jesus, God knows and gives us what we truly need. Indeed, there are times when we don't know what we need, we ask for the wrong thing – for something that will hurt us. And God will not give that to us, but will always give us the right thing. We sometimes think that the absence of what we want means God doesn't care. But “No!” says Jesus in the second story, “He does care, in exactly the same way that a parent cares for a child.”

Some of you may be familiar with a short piece of writing called *The Prayer of a Confederate Soldier*. I don't know if it really came from a Confederate soldier but the story is told that it was found in his pocket as he lay dead on a battlefield in the Civil War.

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things.
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy.
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for but got everything I had hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am, among all people, most richly blessed

In this prayer he asks for what he wants, what we all want – health; strength; power; riches; and says that he doesn't get any of these things, but he concludes even though "*I got nothing that I asked for*" I, nevertheless "*got everything that I hoped for. I am among all people, most richly blessed.*"

In other words, what he implies is this: he didn't know what he was asking for, but God did. As he looked back on his life he could see God's hand in ways that he couldn't have imagined: "Thank God for those times when I didn't get what I wanted and for those times when God provided me something else which was a channel of his grace in my life."

Says Jesus in the second story, God knows what we need. We may ask for the right thing or the wrong thing. God as a parent will sort it out on our behalf for our good. But keep on asking, seeking and knocking.

And in particular, and this is Jesus' third point, *if there is one thing that Jesus knows that God will give to all of his followers without a shadow of a doubt, it is the Holy Spirit*. So you may freely ask for this or that or the next thing, but Jesus says to all who are beside him, every one of you should be asking for this one thing: for God's Holy Spirit.

In your prayers have you asked God to give you the Holy Spirit? It's generally not at the top of most people's lists, but Jesus says it should be at the top of our lists, for every single one of us. We may reply "Well I'm not sure what the Holy Spirit is; it seems kind of mystical and weird." But Jesus explains to his disciples that the Spirit is simply the presence of God, not just out there, not just as an abstract idea but, God's presence with us, around us and within us, the power of God. The presence and the power of God around us and within us. Ask for that, says Jesus, seek for that, knock for that and God will give himself to each of us. Without that presence, without that Spirit we cannot live, we are merely flesh, and the flesh will wither away and die. But with the Spirit all things are possible. Ask, seek, knock.

Doctor Paul Brand was a well known missionary and medical doctor doing his work primarily at the end of the last century. He was an expert in what is called Hansen's Disease, more commonly called leprosy. He worked in India and then in later life in Louisiana (at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital at Carville). When he was a young person, however, he didn't want to be a doctor at all; he wanted to be a carpenter and God had to drag him into medicine, as it were, kicking and screaming (you can read his story in the wonderful book he wrote with

Philip Yancey, *In His Image*¹. And he speaks of the time when he changed his mind, and realized that medicine was in fact what God wanted him to do, and what he himself wanted to do.

He was working as an orderly in a hospital in London and there was an emergency. A young woman had been in an accident and she had lost a lot of blood. And she was wheeled into the hospital and everything went into action and he was swept up between the nurses and the doctors. This is how he tells the story:

She had lost much blood in an accident. It had drained from her skin, leaving her an unearthly pale color, and her oxygen-starved brain had shut down into an unconscious mode.

The hospital staff lurched into their controlled-panic response to any patient near death. A nurse dashed down a corridor for a blood transfusion bottle while a doctor fumbled with the apparatus to get the transfusion going. Another doctor, seeing my white coat, thrust a blood pressure cuff at me. Fortunately, I was trained to read pulse and blood pressure, but I could not detect the faintest flicker of a pulse on her cold, limp wrist.

She looked like a waxwork madonna or an alabaster saint in a cathedral. Her lips, too, were pallid, and as the doctor searched her chest with his stethoscope I noticed that even the nipple of her small breast was white. Only a few freckles stood out against her pallor. She did not seem to be breathing, having long before passed through the desperate phase of heaving breathing. I felt sure she was dead.

The nurse arrived with a bottle of blood, which she buckled into a high metal stand as the doctor punctured the woman's vein with a large needle. They had mounted the bottle high and were using an extra-long tube so that the increase in pressure would push the blood into her body faster. The staff told me to keep watch over the emptying bottle while they scurried off for more blood.

Nothing in my memory can compare to the excitement of what happened next. Certainly the precise details of that scene remain vividly with me to this day. As I nervously held her wrist while the others were gone, suddenly I could feel the faintest press of a pulse. Or was it my own pulse? I searched again—it was there, barely perceptible but regular, at least. The next bottle of blood arrived and was quickly connected. A spot of pink appeared on her cheek, and spread into a beautiful flush. Her lips darkened pink, then red, and her body quivered in a kind of sighing breath.

Then her eyelids fluttered lightly and at last parted. She squinted at first, as her pupils adjusted to the bright lights of the room, and at last she looked directly at me. To my enormous surprise, in a very short time she spoke, asking for water. That young woman entered my life for only an hour or so, but the experience left me utterly changed. I had seen a miracle: the creation of Eve when breath entered into and animated her body, the raising of Lazarus. If medicine, if blood could do this . . .

. . . if that's what medicine can do, if that's what God can do through me, then this is what I want to do with my life: the power of God, working through the presence of blood, filling this woman's body with new life.

The Holy Spirit is like that in our lives. Without the Spirit we're lifeless. With the spirit there is life in abundance. There is color to life, there is meaning to life. Jesus said there is abundant life (John 10:10). The Spirit is like that blood.

- The Spirit is like gas in your car: it can take you to places you could never go without it.

- The Spirit is like sap in a tree. Without sap, a tree is lifeless, merely a piece of wood, good only for firewood. But when there is sap coming up into the tree then the leaves turn bright and green, and fruit begins to appear in all kinds of ways so that tree becomes a source of nourishment and beauty for the world around.

In the same way, says the Scripture, the Spirit produces fruit in our lives (Galatians 5:22-23) – *love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and generosity and self control* – and all of these gifts, this fruit, comes not because of our own strength but because of the life of God within us, the Holy Spirit.

Ask for this, says Jesus. Seek this out, says Jesus! Knock at God's door for this, persistently, annoyingly, until you get it! This is a good gift of God. The very best, and you will receive. You *will* receive.

In two stories, two great stories that Jesus tells:

1. About persistence at knocking on the door of God's heart. When was the last time you bothered God? Have you ever entered into a relationship where God might just get a little annoyed with you because you're so persistent says Jesus? Press God. This is what God wants, it's okay, do it.
2. God knows what's best at those moments when we're going through a valley and we say "God never hears me." Jesus in the second story reminds us that God is like any parent, knowing exactly what is best for the child. Know this as you come before God in prayer.
3. And above all that you ask, ask for God Himself to invade your life, to be around you with his presence and within you in his power. And you will find God doing more in your life than you will ever hope or think or imagine.

My friends, this is the word of the Lord, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory now and forever, Amen. Let us pray.

Holy God, thank you for our teacher the Lord Jesus Christ. May His word fill our lives richly and so be the source of great grace and power and life. Amen.

1. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *In His Image* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) pp. 52-54.

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