

## AGAINST ALL ODDS

Luke 11:1-13

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time      July 28, 2019

Let me try something for a moment. I want you to imagine that you are sitting in the office of a co-worker early one morning. This colleague is also a dear friend, who has been feeling poorly for weeks and has just come back to work after several days of diagnostic tests in the hospital. The friend reports that the preliminary diagnosis points to a malignancy. The word scares and startles you in your hearing as much as it seems to unnerve the one who speaks it. And your friend, obviously stunned and fearful, turns to you and says, “I need you to pray for me. Could you pray with me now?”

For some of you the next step is down a well-worn path, over which years of prayers have been said. For others, the next step is more difficult, for though you have prayed in the past, most of the prayers have been written in church bulletins or memorized for a table grace or a child’s goodnight. For still others of you, what the friend has asked is deeply unsettling, leaving you with a host of questions. Of course, you will pray for your friend, but where does one begin? What are the words to speak? What is the proper posture? What if one’s prayers aren’t heard, much less answered?

Not infrequently people ask me such questions, seeking help with prayer. Several have done so recently. Often, I respond by saying that prayer, straightforwardly described, is simply conversation with God - honest and open, whether the mood is exuberant or desperate, whether what one is feeling is joy, or fear, or even anger. Look to the Psalms, I say, and listen to the sometimes anguished, sometimes bewildered, sometimes effervescent prayers of the psalmist. The prayers you whisper across the years and circumstances of your life will run the gamut of such moods and emotions.

Considering the Psalms and looking closely at our passage from the Gospel of Luke, I find several important hints about prayer that are particularly helpful. First, *prayer is a discipline*. Like other disciplines, it takes practice for it to become substantive in our lives. That is not to say that there are no spontaneous prayers, no outbursts of praise or thanksgiving or petition, but as Luke understands Jesus’ teaching on prayer, true prayer is a learned experience and not simply the release of the heart’s natural longings.<sup>1</sup>

And so, Jesus gives his disciples even the words to use when they pray. Luke remembers those words a bit differently than does Matthew in his longer and more familiar form. Luke remembers Jesus employing fewer words... a couple of brief ascriptions of praise to God and three petitions for those who are praying. Interestingly, in Luke’s remembrance the petitioner asks God to forgive sins rather than debts, but in terms of forgiving others, it is for their debts... perhaps reflecting Luke’s clear concern

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, in Craddock, Hayes, Holladay and Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, 352.

that possessions not hinder the experience of community.<sup>2</sup> But the thrust of the prayer is the same as in Matthew. A friend says,

There's something comforting in this picture of Jesus giving his disciples the words to use. [For one thing, it prompts in us] a recognition that prayer is not a casual thing. We don't swagger down the aisle and plop down in the second pew in God's presence. When we talk to God, it [may] be good to remember that we don't know how to talk to God, because God is beyond us. But Jesus gives us the very words, the language... which becomes our bridge. When you pray... say.... Discipline is [implicit], but first, it is a gift.<sup>3</sup>

And the gift of the words to say is a most precious gift... formative for the discipline itself. There is no telling how many persons have mouthed the words of the Lord's Prayer in surgical waiting rooms, on airplanes, after a family crisis, or even in a moment of profound gratitude. Words to speak when we can find no word ourselves. Words that form a resounding chorus of praise and petition. Words that express a longing, beyond the world we experience, for the world God intends. . . for the kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven.

The first hint here is that prayer is a practiced discipline. The second hint is linked to such discipline. It is important to *be persistent in your prayer*, Luke says. Be persistent. Frederick Buechner says:

According to Jesus, by far the most important thing about praying is to keep at it. The images he uses to explain this are all rather comic, as though he thought it was rather comic to have to explain it at all. He says God is like a friend you go to borrow bread from at midnight. The friend tells you in effect to drop dead, but you go on knocking anyway until he finally gives you what you want so he can go back to bed again. Or God is like a crooked judge who refuses to hear the case of a certain poor widow, presumably because he knows there's nothing much in it for him. But she keeps on hounding him until he finally hears her case just to get her out of his hair. Even a [harsh person], Jesus says, won't give his own child a black eye when he asks for peanut butter and jelly, so how all the more will God when [God's] children [ask].

Be importunate, Jesus says - not, one assumes, because you have to beat a path to God's door before he'll open it, but because until you beat the path, maybe there's no way of getting to *your* door.<sup>4</sup>

Be persistent in prayer, knowing that your prayers *will* be heard. . . that God's kingdom will come, God's will *will* be done... that justice and mercy will finally triumph in the end, even if in the moment our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears. Most of us are prone to

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<sup>2</sup> Craddock, 352.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas L. Are, Jr., in a paper presented to the January 1998 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Memphis, Tennessee.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper and Row, 1973, 70-71.

see all the tragedies of life all around us and simply adjust to them rather than allow ourselves to hope that the world will be transformed; but earnest prayer begins in the trust that God will make all things right. That confidence is the fuel that enables us to keep at our prayers.

My friend Tom Are is pastor of a church in Kansas City. He and I worked together for a season of our lives as colleagues for a while, pushing and prodding each other in matters of faith and life. And I have long known of his great love for his brother, Gene, who was born with cognitive deficits. As Tom says, he was born with “a generous heart but a limited mind.” Speaking of Gene one day, Tom said:

[Gene] will never forget my birthday but will never remember how to spell his own name. Gene has almost never called me by my name. I’m “bwuddah.” He’s [in his fifties now] but could not pass the first grade. If I have prayed shamelessly in my life, it has been about Gene. As [Fred] Craddock would say, “I have stood at the door with bloody knuckles, waiting for the ‘good things.’”

Gene wants to drive a car. That’s his goal in life. Usually it’s a red car, sometimes a convertible. He wants to get his license, stop by the gas station to “fill ‘er up,” buy a Coke with his own money, and drive his car.

Then Tom recounted a recurring conversation with his brother:

“Gene, where do you want to go?” I’ll ask. “I’m gonna come see you....” “That will be great, Gene.” “I’ll take you and we’ll go see Daddy. Don’t tell him I’m coming.” “It’s our secret Gene.”

One day, while visiting Gene near his group home in Louisiana, we sat across from each other at Shoney’s.... Gene had finished his [usual] litany regarding the car. Then, in a moment so unlike him it almost seemed surreal, Gene asked, “Do you think I’ll ever drive a red car, bwuddah?” I said, “Yes. It won’t be soon I don’t guess, but someday you will drive.”

[Then Tom said, of course] he’ll never drive. Certainly not my car. But it’s not about driving. Not even for Gene. It’s about everything that’s gone wrong being set right. I should have said, “Someday you’ll be able to connect with your brother and intelligence won’t be a barrier. . . . Someday you will be able to give the gift of your presence to your father.”

Somewhere, at the foundation of [the Gospel, said Tom], is the promise that God will make life right. The kingdom will come. [Hatred and bigotry and racism and prejudice] will be swallowed up by people committed to living *with* rather than *against* each other. [Our leaders will rediscover the notion of the common good.] The hunger of children will give way to the noise of table blessings. The work of violence will cease, and all God’s children will someday grow up to be neither the haters nor the hated.... That day hasn’t come yet.... But we know that day belongs

to God, and it will come. And today, by the Spirit of God, we ask, seek, knock on the door of that holy time. If we could, we'd give it to each other, wouldn't we? How much more then will God?

Hint two, then: be persistent in your prayers, trusting in the ultimate grace and providence and goodness of God. Know that your prayers will be heard.

The third and final hint Luke offers is that God does answer prayer, though not always affirmatively... nor even, at times, with what we ask. Expect God to answer, but not necessarily in the way you expect. Kathleen Norris says,

Sometimes people will say things like, "Your prayers didn't work, but thanks," as if a person could be praying for only one thing. A miracle. A cure. But in the hardest situations, all one can do is ask for God's mercy: Let my friend die at home, Lord, and not in the hospital. Let her go quickly, God, and with her loved ones present. One... friend, a gentle, thoughtful man who has been in constant physical pain for years and is now confined to a wheelchair, says of prayer, "Often, all I can do is ask God, 'Lord, what is it you want of me?'" From him I have learned that prayer is not asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine. To be made more grateful, more able to see the good in what you have been given instead of always grieving for what might have been. People who are in the habit of praying... know that when a prayer is answered, it is [almost] never in the way [they] expect.<sup>5</sup>

So, back to that office and your friend. "I need you to pray for me," says this one so dear to you. And, of course, you will pray. But you know there are risks inherent in doing so. Beyond finding the right words, beyond your feelings of dis-ease and vulnerability, the seemingly greatest risk is that your colleague's disease may spread, and that, despite your prayers, your friend may die. And with that death you may sense that you have failed in prayer, or that God has failed you. It may be easier not to pray than to take such a risk.

To such a fear Luke's Gospel answers loud and clear: keep praying. Keep praying. Even when your prayers are dry as dust, keep praying.

Just keep praying, Jesus says. Remember the sleepy friend, the crooked judge. Even if [your friend] dies, keep on beating the path to God's door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer, the God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1998, 60-61.

<sup>6</sup> Buechner, 71.