

Covenant Presbyterian Church

"Knock Knock!" Psalm 85; Luke 11:5-13

Jeff Fox-Kline August 18, 2019

I learned something this week! Ok, I guess we should strive to learn something every week, but this week I also learned something! The parable that we are about to hear is a parable with many different names. The most common name is 'the friend at midnight'. I've also heard it called the complacent neighbor. The name for the parable that I had to google is 'the parable of the importunate neighbor'. Importunate! What a neat word, like unfortunate, but completely different. It means 'overly persistent, to the point of being troublesome'. Telemarketers are importunate. Toddlers are importunate. Me asking you to sign up for our small groups borders on the importunate. So if someone asks you how the sermon went, you can at least say "I learned something".

A reading from Luke

⁵And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be

opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for^[e] a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit^[f] to those who ask him!”

The parable of the importunate neighbor. First of all, I find this parable to be confusing. Not in the way that parables are supposed to be confusing, but the syntax of the story is a little bit wonky. There are three characters in the parable and all of them are referred to as a friend at one point or another, so it gets weird. So I’m going to summarize it, hopefully clearing it up a bit. One night a man goes to his neighbor at midnight, waking up the whole house and saying “I had a friend stop by unexpectedly and I need to feed him. Can I borrow some bread?” The neighbor says “I’ve locked my door and you’re going to wake the baby. I’m not giving you anything.” Even though the neighbor won’t give the bread out of friendship, he’ll at least do it because of the persistence of the bread-requester.

Hopefully that clears up the parable a bit for you all. This brings me to the second problem with the parable: I have a difficult time with what it says. If you read it in the way that it seems that Jesus meant it, the takeaway seems to be “If you pray hard enough and annoy God enough, you’ll get what you want”. This is not the way that I think about prayer. As a matter of fact, I think that it’s a downright dangerous way to think of prayer. This is the kind of prayer that leads people away from their faith. This is the kind of prayer that leads to devastation. This is the kind of prayer that is said in hospital beds. The prayers for the sickness to go away. And then, if the sickness doesn’t go away, the only logical conclusion is that God doesn’t actually care. Saying that if you just pray often enough, you’ll

get what you're asking for is also demonstrably false. If not, then every sports team would win every game and we'd have a 32-way tie in the super bowl.

So I had a hard time understanding the actual words of the parable, and then I had a hard time understanding the meaning of the parable. Does this really mean that if we pester God enough that we'll get what we ask for? One big help in informing my understanding of the parable is to dig into the language that Jesus used. The word in verse 8 that we read that really stands out as the crux of the parable is the word persistence. It strikes me as a confusing word in the context. How many times does Jesus say that the importunate neighbor knocked? By my count, he only knocked once. Sure, he knocked at a terrible time of night, but it really seems like there was only one knock. Not very persistent if you ask me. In my research about this passage, one thing became clear – the word persistence is a terrible translation of the Greek. The word in Greek is '*anaideia*' which more accurately translates to shamelessness. So why would the translation say 'persistence'? On commentary that I read said "the difficulty in understanding how [shameless] applies in this context has led interpreters to translate it as 'persistence', a meaning it does not have in any other ancient text". I gotta say, not understanding how it's applicable is not a good reason to mistranslate the word. There's lots of confusing stuff in the Bible, but I'm not about to write my own translation into one that I think more sense. Honestly, I think the translation of the word as 'shameless' is better anyway.

What does it mean to be shameless? In some cases, it is a good thing to have shame. It helps to have shame because shame is one of the things that keeps society running smoothly. Shame is what keeps people from saying or doing things that society deems unacceptable. Largely, it is a shameful act to be overtly racist, and I think increasing the amount of shame that people feel for racist actions is a positive thing. But shame can be used in a dangerous way as well.

Think about the shame that keeps victims of sexual abuse silent and think about the ways in which society treats a person when they come forward with an accusation. In this case, there is a tragic consequence of shame that makes people feel that it is their fault for the abuse. Shame, when misplaced, can be deadly. Shame, ultimately, is about what is or is not acceptable in a society, sometimes it can help set the ethical boundaries, but sometimes it can damage people's souls.

So why, then, might Jesus be telling us to pray shamelessly? One of the things that shame does is that it keeps us from expressing our authentic selves. Shame is what culture imposes on us that prevents us from expressing what we believe and who we are deep down inside. Sometimes those external barriers are truly external, and the shame is what keeps us from expressing views that we keep secret. But sometimes the shame that we feel becomes such a deep presence that it keeps us from being able to understand ourselves. Sometimes shame burrows in and prevents us from taking an honest assessment of who we are and what we need. In telling us to pray shamelessly, Jesus is telling us that we need to work to overcome those things that keep us from recognizing our deepest needs.

And this is a style of prayer that echoes throughout the history of humanity's relationship with God. Listen to Job's prayer after all the calamities that struck him. Listen to the shameless anguish of a man who is at the end of his rope. A man who shamelessly asks that God curse the very day he was born:

Let the day perish in which I was born,
and the night that said,
'A man-child is conceived.'

⁴Let that day be darkness!

May God above not seek it,
or light shine on it.

⁵Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.

Let clouds settle upon it;

let the blackness of the day terrify it.

Listen to the Psalmist lament the crushing weight of his sins from Psalm 38:

There is no soundness in my flesh

because of your indignation;

there is no health in my bones

because of my sin.

⁴For my iniquities have gone over my head;

they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.

⁵My wounds grow foul and fester

because of my foolishness;

⁶I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;

all day long I go around mourning.

Listen to the Psalmist in the words that we read earlier in worship:

Restore us again, O God of our salvation,

and put away your indignation toward us.

⁵Will you be angry with us forever?

Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

The words of scripture speak to shameless prayer, prayer that speaks honestly and deeply about the place in which they person praying finds themselves.

In order to pray as Jesus tells us, we need to find the ways to empty ourselves of shame, to find ways to look under the things that we are culturally conditioned to ignore. Maybe you're afraid of what happens when you empty yourself of that shame. I think that's a good thing. What is the point of praying dishonestly?

What do we gain when our private prayers are filled with us ignoring our true selves? Do we think we're tricking God? Even if we're successfully fooling ourselves, we have no hope of fooling God. This guileless prayer helps us to know ourselves better, it helps us to be more honest with ourselves, it helps us to be more honest with God.

Shameless prayer reveals our deepest desires. It reveals what we truly need from God, rather than what we think we want. In those times it becomes less about winning at sports or winning the lottery. When we pray shamelessly and honestly, we can make room for God's response, and for our ability to listen to God's response. One of my greatest revelations in my own prayer life was when I was serving as a chaplain in Chicago. I was called to the bedside of a woman who was just told that she needed to lose her leg below the knee. She asked me to pray. Prior to this, I thought of my prayers as not very worthwhile. I could pray and pray, but I knew that God wouldn't give this woman her leg back. So I asked her what she wanted, and she asked me to pray for acceptance. We held hands and prayed together and by the end we were both had tears in our eyes. When I let go of the notion that my prayers were going to get her leg back and opened myself up to shameless prayer, I could feel the Holy Spirit at work. It transformed the way I thought about prayer. No longer was it a way of begging God for whatever I wanted, but a way to open myself to what God wanted to do.

Because the truth is that God will not give us whatever we pray for. Sometimes when we ask God for an egg, we get back what feels like a scorpion. Sometimes even when we pray as persistently and as hard as we know how we still get back a response that we loathe. When we think about God answering our prayers, we need to realize that what we pray for may not necessarily come to pass. I abhor the violence humans inflict on one another. I find the way that people are senselessly dying to be an abomination. If I pray for the violence to end, will that

end the violence? No, it will not. What prayer does, however, is it empties us of our pretense, our shame, our ego and allows God to enter in. Praying for an end to violence will not end violence on its own, but it will create in me a space for God to work on myself, to help bring me to a place where I can become a peacemaker. Prayer changes the world because prayer empties out our souls and allows the Holy Spirit to become part of the equation.

Here is what Jesus said “If the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit^[1] to those who ask him!” Our prayer may not result in the hopes we have, but if we pray earnestly and shamelessly we die to those things that interfere with our receiving of the Holy Spirit. The promise of God is not to answer every prayer in the way we expect or desire, but it is a promise of the Holy Spirit. This is the same Spirit that gave birth to the church, that inspired the prophets, that compel us to go out and serve God. When we empty ourselves of the shame that keeps us from being honest with God, then we open a hole that can be filled with justice, love, compassion, peace and understanding. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that prayer transforms us. And having been transformed, we may go out and transform the world.