

Proper 12
July 25, 2010

St. Mark Lutheran Church
Rev. Alan Wolkenhauer

Luke 11:1-13 Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ²He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."

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. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If 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 to those who ask him!"

Keep at It

When I read today's Gospel, I couldn't help but think back to one of my most tiring vacations ever. (No, it wasn't Germany.) We lived in Iowa at the time and had driven to California with our three children to visit all the relatives. We got back home around 2:00 in the morning, made it to bed by 3:00, and we planned to sleep until noon. But at 8:00, the doorbell started ringing. Ding dong. I ignored it. Ding dong. It rang again. I rolled over and put the pillow over my head. Ding dong. By then, I knew it could only be one thing. The little boy across the street had seen our van in the driveway and wanted to know if Nathan could play. But Nathan was sleeping, and I wasn't

going to get up, put on my robe, and walk across the house to give our little doorbell ringer that message. I'd just wait for him to go away. Finally the ringing stopped...for about 5 seconds. Then, ding dong ding dong ding dong ding dong. So I got up, threw on my robe and stumbled toward the door. I put on the best smile I could muster and said, "Nathan's still sleeping, because we got home very late last night. I'm sure he'd love to play with you, though. Why don't you come back in a couple hours? And next time," I added, "Would you please just ring the doorbell once instead of over and over again?"

But that's how Jesus wants us to pray. "Lord, teach us to pray," his disciples ask, and Jesus tells them that the most important thing about prayer is to keep at it, again and again, without ceasing. And he told them a story: "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to his house at midnight, stand outside his bedroom window and holler at him, saying, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend is visiting and I don't have anything to feed him." Now this was in the days before electric lights or television, so midnight was a lot later than it seems today. It was also in the days before private bedrooms, so the entire family would be in a small room lying on mats across the floor. You can understand the friend's frustration when he calls out, "Don't bother me; my door is locked and my children are with me in bed; I can't get up and give you anything now." And even though this was in the days before

doorbells, you can almost hear the ding dong, as Jesus explains, “I 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.” “Lord, teach us to pray,” the disciples ask. And Jesus says, “Be like that friend when you pray. Keep at it again and again and again.”

Another time, Jesus told a story about a widow and a judge. Day after day, she’d go before him, and day after day he’d refuse to listen to her complaint. But finally, Jesus said, the judge gave in, not because he suddenly became compassionate, but because her persistence was driving him crazy. Jesus says, “Be like that widow when you pray. Keep at it again and again.”

But why? Is God really like a crooked judge who has to be hounded before he’ll do justice? Is God like a sleepy friend who’ll only give you what you want in order to shut you up? Is God like some grumpy neighbor who got back home late at night and won’t answer the door until your finger nearly falls off from all the ding donging? Why does Jesus tell us to be persistent in prayer? Doesn’t God already know what we need even before we ask? Isn’t he always ready to hear our prayers? Why should we keep praying over and over again? Isn’t once enough?

Well, I suppose once would be enough if prayer was like Aladdin’s magic lamp -- all you need to do is rub it and the genie appears to do

whatever you want. Maybe one prayer would be enough if that's what prayer was meant to be. Or if prayer was like a suggestion box, persistence wouldn't be necessary. If God wanted us to pray so we could give advice on how to run the world, one prayer for each suggestion would do the trick.

But Jesus indicates that prayer is much more than that. Prayer is not some magic lamp that forces God to give us what we want. It's not a suggestion box that tells God what we think he should be doing. God is the creator of the universe. God made you and knows you better than you know yourself. Prayer is not a method of manipulating God's will or giving God advice. God can get along just fine without that. As Luther says in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer: "The good and gracious will of God is surely done without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may be done also among us." In other words, prayer doesn't change God -- prayer changes us!

So Jesus says to be persistent in prayer. He tells us to keep at it. Because prayer -- real prayer, is communication with God. It's a like a loving conversation between a parent and a child. And in that conversation, good things happen between God and the person who is praying. God wants that conversation to be ongoing; he wants his children to talk to him in prayer, because in prayer, your relationship with God is strengthened and nurtured.

And that communication is a two way street. We talk to God in prayer. We share our wants and needs: "Give us today our daily bread." We confess

our sins and failings: “Forgive us our sins.” We ask for help in our struggles and our fears: “Save us from the time of trial.” In prayer, we talk to God about the things that matter most. And God talks to us. God reveals parental love and concern, so that we can call him our Father. God leads us to desire his will, so that instead of prayer being a tool for our own desires, we can pray, “Your kingdom come.” As we live in constant communication with God, God teaches us to live the words we pray: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Prayer is two way communication, like conversation within a family. So, Jesus says, keep at it; be persistent. That’s the way to pray.

When we pray constantly, our lives with God will grow deeper and become more meaningful. When you’re regular in your conversations with your Lord, your prayers will make a tremendous difference in your life. That doesn’t mean that you’ll always get what you want -- that you’ll be healed of every infirmity or be successful in every endeavor. But your prayers will make a difference because you’ll be connected to God, your heavenly Father. You’ll look at the world through your Savior’s loving eyes; you’ll realize more and more that you are God’s precious child, and your faith in God’s wisdom and goodness will grow each day. Pray constantly. Keep at it. And God will fill you with the Holy Spirit, the best gift of all.

A pastor I know prayed with a woman who was dying of cancer. Day after day they prayed for a cure, but a cure did not come. Finally one day she said, "Pastor, today let's not pray that I'll be cured. Let's pray that, whatever happens, God will be close to me. That's really what I've wanted all along."

Be constant in prayer. Pray without ceasing. Be persistent as you come to God with your deepest hopes and sorrows. And know, that like a loving parent, God will be close to you in all things. Isn't that really what you've wanted all along? Amen.