

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Parables on the Way to the Cross: Praying with Persistence
The Rev. Bethany Peerbolte
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Psalm 4; Luke 11:5-8

This parable is sandwiched between two more popular sections of scripture. Just before this parable Jesus teaches the prayer we now call the Lord's prayer and directly after is the well loved section about God giving us whatever we ask for in Jesus' name. It's obvious why people love these other sections. One is a foundational prayer that we teach our children as soon as we can and say every time we worship together. The section after this parable about asking for things in Jesus' name just feels great. Anything we ask for!? Really!? It's like Christmas-morning levels of serotonin.

And between these highly lauded sections of the Bible is a little parable about knocking on a friend's door when we're in need. Like all good parables this vignette is supposed to teach us something about God and how we are being asked to behave in the world. These stories help us better understand God and through that understanding better live our lives. We are God's stand-ins in this world and a big part of our purpose here is to express God's essence to others, so when we learn something about how God acts, we can also assume God is asking us to do something similar. Therefore, we listen to parables to learn about God and about ourselves.

The parable goes like this: A traveler is heading to a friend's house. For some reason they are late arriving, maybe the sun was too hot that day and they had to rest, or they got turned around on the road. Whatever the reason, they get to their friend's house in the middle of the night.

This friend immediately panics. Hospitality is highly valued and the homeowner will seem rude if they do not have something for their traveling friend to eat. This homeowner is not rich, so they do not have extra food stored up to care for the traveling friend. This friend is embarrassingly unprepared.

Fortunately, this homeowner has another friend nearby who does have some wealth so they have extra stores of food. Better yet this is a good friend whom they believe will understand their situation and help. The homeowner goes to the nearby friend and knocks on their door.

The parable asks the listener to decide what is the best way to respond to the knock. Either the person inside will reject the knock and stay in their comfortable bed (it is, after all, the middle of the night and the door is closed which means the family is not receiving visitors anymore) OR maybe the sleeping, comfortable friend will hear the knock and recognize that only someone who is in real need would disturb them and get up to help.

Jesus' tone gives away what God's response would be. Jesus says, "Who among you would curl tighter into your cozy bed if you heard a friend knocking and crying out in need, Or (wink wink) would you get up (wink wink) and help them (wink wink). It is obvious in the way Jesus tells this parable that the correct action is to get up and help the friend.

Jesus says praying to God is like this scene. We are the friend who has found themselves in need. God is the one cozy in bed, but is such a good friend that God always gets up to answer a knock at the door. All we need to do is knock and ask for what we need in prayer.

That is what the parable and the following passages say: God answers prayer. We go on to read, "Knock and the door will be opened to you, ask and you shall receive." This is actually hotly debated about what that actually means. Not

many people are comfortable saying ANYTHING we ask for in Jesus' name will be granted to us. We have a sense that at times people pray for things that should not be given to them.

I have heard people say God does answer all prayers with one of three answers: "Yes," "No," and "Wait," however I've always had a problem with this. "No" just does not seem to line up with what scripture says about praying to God. It says in the bible, knock and the door will open, seek and find, ask and you shall receive. That is what we are told. Jesus is telling us God gets out of bed to help when we knock and make our needs known. "No" doesn't add up with what scripture is describing to us.

A truly loving God would never say "no" when we are in need. And when we pray, even when we ask for frivolous things there is something inside us that is registering it as a need -- a need enough to ask God, to knock on the door and disturb God from their comfy bed. If something inside us feels it is need enough to ask, then how can a loving God just say "no" or even "wait?" Those answers don't feel loving or even line up with the God we meet in scripture.

But we have all experienced a prayer that seemingly goes unanswered. If God did not say yes, and we see God answers all prayer, how did God answer in these times if not with "no" or "wait?"

I think God gives us one of two answers: "yes" and "tell me more."

We all want the yes, of course. Yes gets the headlines. Definitely answered prayers are what we want when we pray. We want to get answers, we want to experience miracles, we want to receive the things we are asking for. And sometimes we get "tell me more."

Tell me more means God HAS gotten out of the comfy bed to come help. Tell me more means God can't really say yes to our request yet, for some reason, but God wants to problem solve with us to become a partner in the solution. Maybe in the course of telling God more we find something better to meet our need, something God will say yes to. Tell me more allows us to understand better what we are truly in need of.

Take, for example, a child asking for ice cream. We could just say yes or no depending on the situation or we could say tell me more. Tell me more. Are you hungry? Does your throat hurt? Do you just see an ice cream store? Tell me more about why you want ice cream. We may find out the child is hungry and can talk about a better way to fill that need. If we only ever say yes or no, the child never learns when ice cream is appropriate and when it is not. With yes and no, the parent holds onto all the knowledge and regulation of ice cream. BUT if you ask the child to tell us more, it leads us into a conversation that can teach them how to better see and meet their needs.

We can get huffy when God says tell me more. The lack of an immediate yes is a bit of a let down, but the reality is God is more invested with the tell me more option. It means God is not just getting out of bed to throw loafs of bread at us. God is joining us, sitting down with us, listening to us, asking questions of us. Tell me more means God wants to get to the bottom of our needs so that God can say yes to exactly what we need.

God is the friend who will get out of the comfy bed every time when we come knocking in the middle of the night.

To learn this about God encourages us to be fearless in what we ask for. Sure, praying for a snow day may not feel it is on the same level as asking for world peace, but God does not rank prayers. God will get out of bed for you no matter what the ask is. And here is the best part: ask and it will be given to you! Will it be exactly the first thing you asked for? Maybe not, but God will stay up with you as long as it takes to figure out what you and God can agree will meet the need.

To learn this about God also means this is how God wants us to engage when others make their needs known to us. I will advocate for the use of “no” on our part. We don’t have the patience and time and bigger picture perspective like God does to always say yes. We have limits and so “no” has to be a part of our answering options. AND we need to understand the power of “tell me more” and utilize that power as often as we can.

Tell me more can sort out some pretty sticky situations. During World War 2, President Roosevelt was on board the battleship USS Iowa on a long voyage to North Africa. Attached to the USS Iowa was a protective convoy, and one of the member ships was the destroyer USS William D. Porter. To put it mildly, the William D. Porter had not performed well as protection and made some terrible mistakes along the journey.

At one point, President Roosevelt requested an anti-aircraft drill by shooting at balloons. During the exercise, the William D. Porter wanted to clear its shameful name and perform well to prove themselves, but they accidentally fired a ready and armed torpedo right at the USS Iowa.

To make matters even worse, the captain of the William D. Porter didn’t radio the USS Iowa about the torpedo because he wanted to stick to the rules of the drill and use light signals to tell them a torpedo was on its way. When they realized the USS Iowa didn’t understand their signaling, they broke radio silence and warned the battleship of the incoming torpedo. Fortunately, they managed to avoid the torpedo.

Instead of asking tell me more, the USS Iowa assumed this maneuver was an assassination attempt. The USS Iowa pointed all of its guns at the William D. Porter. Thankfully the captain of the USS Iowa did ask for William D Porter to “tell them more” and they sorted out the mess. Afterwards, the William D. Porter was always greeted with “Don’t shoot, we’re Republicans!”

Tell me more is an option we need to utilize. When we cannot say yes, we flip too quickly to thinking no is the only other answer we can give. When we disagree with someone we can too quickly assume they are out to get us. Even when someone is sending torpedoes your way it may be worth asking “tell me more.”

Tell me more allows us to answer the door for more friends than just the ones we can say yes to. There are friends knocking on our doors. Friends scared they will be separated from their children, Friends afraid to run in their own neighborhoods, Friends who are not able to be themselves in their workplaces. Friends who are worried about the policies of this new administration. Friends who stress over their profession being completely upended. They are in need and we might not agree with how they want to solve the problem, yet if we can’t say yes right away we don’t need to reject them and curl up tighter in our comfy blankets in bed. We can ask them to tell us more.

When we seek to understand the needs of others we can partner with them to find solutions. We might not be able to say yes yet, but in the course of the conversation we may find something we can say yes to. We can, and I believe God’s example tells us we should, get out of bed and at the very least ask them to tell us more about their needs.

It is what God does for us with every prayer we pray. When God cannot tell us YES, God says tell me more and encourages us to continue in prayer. And eventually, we, along with God, find a way to YES.

May we be persistent enough to ask “tell me more.”