

**“Persistence! Keeping At It!”** - [Luke 11:1-13]

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(Some of the research and influence for this sermon was inspired by  
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The teaching text that we have just read from Luke seems to suggest that prayer, does not come naturally. This gospel text implies that each of us must be taught to pray. The parable that Jesus tells is difficult, not only because vv 5-8 contain so many disconnected clauses and other syntactical problems, but also because the parable raises troubling theological questions. What sort of God is this who demands that we, like the persistent man at midnight, keep banging on God’s door before He will respond?

This morning I want to take a few minutes to focus upon the theme of persistent prayer, persistence in worship, indeed, persistence in our relationship with God. The parable promises that our persistence in our relationship with God will be rewarded. Implied in the parable is the promise that God is quite willing to respond to our prayers.

Most of the time we stress what God in Christ has done and will do for us and our salvation. And that is the appropriate theological theme that runs throughout Scripture. This Sunday let our thoughts be an exhortation to keep at it in the faith, because it is a plea for persistence.

We have learned long ago that we are saved by grace; that is, we are saved not by anything that we do, but by what God does. We can do nothing to add to our salvation in Jesus Christ. What could we do to add to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross? All we can do is receive it, accept it, and give thanks for it.

I want us to consider what Jesus says about persistence. Jesus begins by talking about prayer. His disciples have asked him to teach them how to pray (11:1). In response, Jesus tells a parable about a very persistent intruder at midnight. Jesus calls him a “friend,” but anyone, friend or not, who bangs on your door in the middle of the night seems more like an intruder to me. The man banging on the door says that he is in a desperate situation. A friend has arrived at his house in the middle of the night, probably hungry after a long trip, *“and I have nothing to feed him.”*

Sorry. It is the middle of the night. Besides, who is a better friend? This person who has shown up unannounced out of nowhere expecting to be fed in the middle of the night, or me who is sound asleep with my own family? At any rate, this friend so rudely awakened, basically tells the pleading man, *“Get lost!”* But this man is not so easily put off. He keeps banging on the door, calling him, leaving messages on his answering machine, in short, making a general nuisance of himself until finally the man, though he cares little about the dilemma of his friend who would be a host, says to himself, *“Though I care nothing for this man’s predicament, and though I think this man is a pain in the neck to be bothering me in this way in the middle of the night, I will give this man what he wants to get him out of my hair so I can get back to sleep!”*

Jesus says that we ought to be that, in regard to prayer. This has always been a rather disturbing parable for me. What are we to take from this? That God is like that sulky friend at midnight, the man who requires constant banging on his door in order to get his attention? I think we need to first agree that prayer is a lot more than just the words we say to God. Prayer is all the things that we do and say in our relationship with God. In fact, our relationship with God is prayer. So this is not so much a story about the

right technique in prayer, but our side of a right relationship with God. God, in Jesus Christ, has already done all that needs to be done to fulfill God's part in the relationship. God sent his only son Jesus to us, who taught us, healed, lived among us, suffered for us, and died, then rose again from the dead after having gone down into Hell for us. He came back to us and He forgave us. That is God's part of the deal.

But what about our part of this relationship? I think that this is a parable about the terms of relationship with God. Our part of the deal involves persistence. We are saved by God's grace, not by our work, but - there are a lot of people who say that God is distant from them. They say that when they pray, they feel like they are just talking to themselves.

They hear stories about God impacting people's lives, but these stories seem to them as mere fairy tales. God has never said or done anything to them, so they say. And yet, perhaps the problem is not that God is distant from them, but rather the other way around.

They have become distant from God. How often do they participate in regular worship? How often do they ever pray? Do they ever read the Bible or seek God's word for their lives? And in our busy contemporary world - how often do they take time to say a moment of thanks before a meal?

Here is a parable that I would like to share with you. A man and a woman were married. They promised, as people do in marriage, to live together forever, no matter what. Shortly after their honeymoon, the man went on a long trip. He left town and left no forwarding address. His young wife never heard from him again. Ten years later, he showed up back in town. He went to his wife and planned to resume married life just as they had after the honeymoon. And yet, to his surprise, his wife hardly recognized him. She had already had their marriage annulled and was now married to another man.

*"Why don't you love me anymore?"* he protested. *"Why have you forsaken me? Why have you broken our marriage promises?"*

I have noted as some of you may have, when someone is touched by the death of someone they love, if the grieving person has never been to a funeral, has never heard what the church does and says at the time of death, that person seemed to be in a distinct disadvantage when it comes to grief. That person lacks experience with grief, that person doesn't know what to think about, when it comes to death.

Contrast this with a woman in one of my previous charges whose husband died quite unexpectedly and suddenly. I went over to her house and she met me at the door. She was in tears as she invited me in, and one of the first things she blurted out was, *This is terrible. I feel as if I have been preparing for this moment for most of my life.*" And she was right. It was as if she had sat through a month of Sundays, heard dozens of sermons about Christians and tragedy, as if she were in training for an event of this magnitude.

Contrast that with another person with whom I pastored, who was unexpectedly fired from her job. This threw her into economic distress and terrible emotional turmoil. She suffered depression and needed to be admitted into hospital to get special care and help for a few weeks. A friend of hers, a member of the church, after visiting her in the hospital said, *Poor thing. When it came time for her to let down her bucket, to dig deep down, she found out that she had no water in her well.*" Perhaps you can think that is severe judgment but you can see the truth of it. There are those moments in life that require us to, *"let down our bucket,"* to return to the well springs of hope and courage. And yet, we go to the bank to take out some money and find that we are overdrawn. We do not have the emotional and spiritual resources draw upon. Therefore, we must be persistent.

**You will notice that in our worship, despite the variation in our Sunday services, that our Sundays are characterized by ritual, habit, and repetition. This is not simply because Christians, and Presbyterians in particular, are inherently traditionalists, though in many ways we are. Rather, we are persistent. Jesus has urged us to keep at it. We are formed in the world, by so many different habits and rituals. Therefore, we must come to worship on Sunday and gain different rituals, allow us to be formed by other habits or experiences.**

**We live in a society of instant gratification. There are people who expect to have the fruits of the Christian life - joy, peace, trust, courage, confidence, and all the rest - without the disciplines of the Christian life. There are many who think they can “get” the Christian faith in a few hours here and there when it is convenient or if they have time. Even more think they can get it all if they maintain their one hour of duty every week. But be aware of a promise of an easy, quick payoff when it comes to our relationship with God.**

**I have found in friendship with other people that one of the reasons we have so few friends is that friendship takes time. There must be hours, years, of being with one another, hanging out together, conversing with one another, hearing stories about life, and exploring the richness of another human being. You can't have a really good friend overnight. It requires time. It requires persistence. The same is true with our relationship and friendship with God. God is totally available to us. But we, due to our sin, our distractions, the numerous other cares of the world, are not totally available to God. Therefore, we must keep at it. We must keep focussing, listening, tuning our souls to God's gracious incursions among us. We must keep at it Sunday after Sunday, but also every other day of the week.**

**Faith, hope, love, these are noble, high Christian virtues. But this Sunday, with this worrisome widow who has captured Jesus' attention, I have wanted to put in a word for a more modest, but nevertheless vital virtue. Persistence!**

**Persistence! We need to keep at it 365 days a year. If we keep at it, there will be days enough when we will hear our name called, when we feel that our need has been addressed. Sometimes in spiritual life, when God seems distant from us, that distance may be a sign of God's confidence in us. God does not need to be standing over us at every moment because we have been given what we need to persevere.**

**May God bless you as you mediate on these words spoken and thoughts shared this morning. Let us pray:**

**Lord, the walk with you is not always easy.**

**There are valleys, vast, dry places where the silence is deafening, where the way is hard, and we feel as if we are walking by ourselves.**

**There are many Sunday, we confess, when we want to worship, sincerely try to pray, but it is as if we are talking to ourselves, as if you are very far away.**

**Too many things don't fit.**

**Too many questions remain unanswered.**

**Lord, give us the strength we need to stay with you, to walk behind you, even when we cannot be sure of the way.**

**Help us, in the dry times, in the dark nights, to stay the course, to keep at the faith, to walk with you, to persevere.**

**This we ask, confident that your grace is sufficient. Amen**