

“Teach us to pray.”

The disciples have seen Jesus praying, not just now but on a number of occasions. Jesus prayed at his baptism, and during his ministry, he often withdrew from the crowds, to deserted places our mountaintops to pray, sometimes for an entire night. Prayer was clearly vital to him and it may be that the disciples, seeing this and sensing how prayer fostered the depth of connection from Jesus to his Father, wanted some of that for themselves.

And so Jesus teaches them to pray this prayer that we all know so well. We call it the Lord’s Prayer, but it should perhaps be called the disciple’s prayer as Jesus offered it to them and to us. And it’s a good prayer, beginning as it does by glorifying God—“hallowed be thy name.” Then it calls us to seek after God’s kingdom. And only after those two key elements does the prayer turn toward petitions. And they are petitions for the very basics we need—food, forgiveness and fidelity.

After sharing this very basic and fundamental prayer with his followers. Jesus tells a story, beginning by saying, “suppose one of you has a friend...” He’s asking, could you imagine this happening to you?

...that in the midst of unexpected need, the arrival of surprise visitors in the middle of the night, you would turn to your neighbor for help and that neighbor would turn you away? That your neighbor wouldn’t even come down to the door, but would yell from his bed where he is snuggled up warmly with his children... “leave me alone, I’m in bed comfortably here with my young’ns and I’m not getting up—not for you, not for anything.”

And the Jewish follower of Jesus at the time would shake his head in disbelief and say, “certainly not!” The demands of hospitality at the time of Jesus make the scenario he is describing clearly extraordinary to his listeners. Something like this would never happen.

And so Jesus goes on to say, in effect, if the man won’t respond out of the sacred bonds of friendship, then he will certainly respond from the man’s persistence.

The word in Greek that our translation has as persistence could more accurately be translated “shameless persistence.” And my lectionary pointed out that the word could be equally applied to either character. The man asking for help, for asking for help at an untoward hour of the morning—who presumably continues to knock until he gets the help he needs. Or the neighbor, who may potentially lose face for a shameless disregard for the standards of hospitality.

The point for Jesus’ listeners is that this would not ever happen. A neighbor at the time would never behave in this way. Of course your neighbor will listen, and how much more so, Jesus implies, will your father who loves you listen to your requests, whenever and however they come.

Likewise, would one of you give a child a snake instead of a fish, or a scorpion instead of an egg. Certainly not! How much more so then will your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

Ask and it will be given.

Seek and you will find.

Knock and the door will be opened.

Powerful words of assurance that we can cling to and hold on to. And I don’t know about you, but many times in my life I have asked and received, sought and found, knocked and been

met by God at an open door. I've called out to God and God was there, with a word, with support, with direction, with what was needed at the time.

But certainly it seems like there have been times when that hasn't happened. When the door I've been knocking at is one of those really big, thick heavy doors where the sound of my knock is instantly absorbed into the wood and nobody hears it, least of all God. In fact, the continued knocking has bruised my knuckles so that continuing to knock can at times feel painful. I have had the experience of asking, and asking and asking and not seen a response. And I know that many of you know that experience.

What do we do then? Well, that's where shameless persistence comes in.

Because there are times in our lives when we're asking God for something and we're not hearing a response. And it doesn't seem fair, because sometimes that thing we're asking for is something that is desperately needed—by us, by someone we care about, or even by someone we don't even know but for whom we have prayed. We've felt called to pray—God even instructs us to pray and assures us of an answer—but it seems as though we get nothing.

Maybe it's for someone struggling with a life-threatening illness—especially someone young who shouldn't have to go through what they are going through. Maybe it's someone who is working hard to pull themselves up and out of the stranglehold of addiction. Maybe it's a young couple that desperately wants to get pregnant, that would make great parents, that are ready in every way to have children, but who can't get pregnant. Maybe it's someone dealing with a chronic illness that's creating loss after loss in their life. And we've prayed and prayed and prayed, and it seems like nothing changes. Or, if there is change, it seems like every time there's a step forward then it's two steps backward.

And you may have asked yourself—or you may be asking yourself now, how long do I keep praying? And why bother?

Jerry Sittser has a book called “When God Doesn’t Answer Your Prayer.” I’ve talked before about his book “A Grace Disguised.” He and his family were in a terrible car accident and in that accident he lost his mother, wife and daughter. Following the accident he was then single parent to his remaining three children, each of whom experienced and lived with that traumatic event in different ways. Sittser prayed for them constantly, as he had before the accident—as he had for the daughter who was killed in the accident.

In the book, he writes about prayer as an epic journey. A journey that we live the whole of our lives, and a journey that can take us to places we never imagined. And he talks about persistent prayer. I want to highlight three aspects of persistent prayer that strike me as particularly valuable.

We live in a culture that not only wants things “our way,” but that expects also to get them fast. And so often we do get quick results. I needed a phone number for a program that some pastors in the community are going to participate in. I went to Google Voice, filled out some forms and within 10 minutes had a phone number that we can forward to all our phones. I like to be able to get a haircut within days of deciding I need one, and I’ve never done well with stylists I have to schedule weeks out. Sittser points out that advertisements promise quick results. Lose four inches of your waistline in less than two weeks, or make a five-figure income per month in within thirty days. Or cook gourmet meals after watching a 10-minute video.

And so we think prayer should lead to the same quick results. And sometimes it does. Sometimes we get the answer we need even as we are asking. But all too often, God works in our

lives over years and even decades. And it's not until we look back over a length of time that we can see the ways that God was at work.

As I was thinking about our expectations versus God's response, I was reminded of the relationship of a teenager to their parents and other adults. Sittser even talks about this relative to his own children. Kids of, let's say, "a certain age" are all about themselves, what they are going through and who they are becoming. And it's possible, just possible, that the adults in their lives at that time become merely vehicles for facilitating their needs. "Can I have the car?" "Can I have money for gas, or a movie, or to go out with my friends?" "Can I have a phone?" "Can it be a smart phone?" Parents might be forgiven for feeling at times like an ATM machine.

Reflecting on the way teenagers sometimes treat the adults in their lives, I thought that there are too many times that we are like teenagers treating God like some kind of prayer response ATM, coming to God with our list of items.

But persistent prayer, especially as we pray over a long time for things that seem unanswered, can help us develop a different kind of prayer relationship with God. A relationship that lets go of the list of needs. A relationship that begins to call us beyond expectations for quick and precise response. A relationship with give and take, with listening and with life and hope and trust.

We can also find, continuing to pray even as we feel our prayers go unanswered, that we end up on unexpected detours. Sittser points out that the apostle Paul may have had just such an experience. Paul referred to a "thorn in my flesh." We don't know what the thorn was, but clearly it was a torment to him and a source of struggle.

Paul asked God three times to deliver him from this particular problem, but God didn't answer his prayer. So Paul changed how he was praying. Praying instead that God would help

him to rely on God's power, which was made perfect in Paul's weakness. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

We can find, over a long time of persistent prayer that the thing we pray for changes. We can find that the way that we pray changes. We can find that we ourselves are changed.

Henri Nowen advises, "You must be patient...until your hands are completely open." A beautiful image. Because it's in that openness that I think we can finally receive God and see the ways that God is at work for that which we pray for. We can see the ways that God is at work—even and especially in the midst of weakness.

Detour can be frustrating. But detours can take us through things we would have never seen or experienced otherwise. Detours can be God's route for us.

And finally, we persist because God has persisted with us.

I return again to those teenagers who treat the adults in their lives as walking ATM machines. How long do we allow that? How long do we put up with it? How long do we keep loving and caring and giving. Well, if it's your child, or a child in your life that you care deeply about, there is no deadline—you just continue to love and care and you wait for the day that they turn and ask—"So, how are you today?".

God continues to care for us, even when all we do is ask. God continues to care for us, even when we forget to ask. God continues to love us even when we forget God all together. God is there, persistently waiting for us to notice, persistently waiting for us to receive, and persistently waiting for us to see the blessings that are all around us.

When we persist in prayer, even as it seems our prayers are unanswered, we reflect a little bit of the love and trust that God has shown us. When we persist in prayer, we grow in relationship with God who never lets go of us. And when we persist in prayer, we can find ourselves detoured in ways we never expected and never would have looked for, but detoured to places we needed to be.

Sometimes we have to keep asking. And sometimes we have to keep searching and sometimes we have to keep knocking... and knocking... and knocking. Because sometimes the persistence leads us closer to God and God's will.

And a final thought, when our knuckles are bruised and tender and we've prayed ourselves to a place of exhaustion, remember what Paul writes in Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."