

Persistence

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 12, Year C, RCL. Luke 11:1-13. July 24, 2016. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

One of the persistent problems with prayer is persistence. All sorts of things seem to get in the way of praying, and in the face of obstructions, and when nothing dramatic seems to be happening, we tend to veer off course, praying less often and praying with less focus and intensity when we do pray.

When the obstructions to praying seem to come from the outside of us—wherever they do in fact come from—we call those obstacles *resistance*, as if praying itself were resisting us, or some force that doesn't want us to go there. When the obstructions to praying seem to come from within us, as if they were a lack of determination on our part, we call those obstacles *reluctance*. We don't want to go there; something in our feelings, our thoughts, our will, our judgment is holding us back.

Between resistance and reluctance our prayer life can be effectively diminished, either by keeping us from praying at all (or very much) or by keeping us in some sort of narrow rut, some pattern of prayer that becomes increasingly unsatisfactory, so that we become more and more reluctant to embrace prayer at all. This, by the way, is one of the main things that spiritual direction by a person trained in coaching a person's prayer life can help us sort out. Simply reading a good book on prayer can help. But the main

thing we need is encouragement, and the best encourager is Jesus himself.

Jesus appears to have been very aware of this two-headed problem of resistance and reluctance. The Gospels have preserved parables in which Jesus addresses this problem. He consistently—persistently, if you will—prescribes persistence in prayer. In today's reading from the Gospel according to Luke we've heard a famous example of this. A person in need of hospitality during the night persists in requesting it until a sleepy householder gets up and provides it. Jesus implies that if this sleepy householder will respond to persistence, how much more will our heavenly Father, whose love and generosity are boundless, and who is never asleep?

But sometimes it does seem as if God is asleep, doesn't it? Occasionally our prayer produces a stunning response, but usually the results of prayer are mostly...more prayer. The transformation of our lives and the world that prayer causes are best seen over the long haul, by being patient and keeping our eyes open. Prayer is not magic; it is a conversation in a relationship. And its real purpose is to foster that relationship, welding God's heart to our heart as regularly, consistently and openly as possible. Human crankiness, laziness and ignorance, as well as bad influences of all sorts coming at us from the outside, conspire to produce reluctance and resistance. It requires steady effort to maintain any relationship, and all the more so with God, who is delicate about overwhelming us—he doesn't want mindless puppets or terrified slaves. And yet God fiercely desires, one

relationship at a time, to reconcile the world to himself, to heal it, to rebuild it. He wants his kingdom to arrive, on earth as it is in heaven. As part of this process, he wants us in touch with the Holy Spirit so that we can shape our life in the world as the Holy Spirit shapes our inner life, making our awareness of God more constant—less resistant, less reluctant—and our prayers more focused and directed by God.

That is what Jesus was telling us about and what he was making happen in his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension—the whole Gospel story. That is why his special prayer, the Lord's prayer, has the shape it has. I'll talk about that prayer in more detail sometime, but right now I want us to think about it as a call to persist in relationship with God so that we may have what we need to persist in the work of living out the kingdom of God on earth, until the marriage of earth and Heaven is complete.

❖ This sermon is a slight modification of the one preached at the Shared Ministry on July 25, 2010.