

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Tenth Sunday of Pentecost/Ordinary Time – July 24, 2016
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 11:1-13

For Reflection

"The art of love is largely the art of persistence."

- Albert Ellis, American Psychologist (1913-2007)

Persistence

There are so many interesting ideas in this text. Let's pull a few of them out and look at them.

The disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray – suggesting that he would pray differently than all the other people who have taught them to pray – like their parents and rabbis. Apparently John the Baptist did some serious prayer revision – so there is interest in how Jesus might approach the matter.

- **Have any of you asked someone to teach them how to pray? Have any of you taught someone how to pray?** ** I've had interesting results with Peter – who is in his literalistic phase – and insists that G-d is in charge of his wins and losses in baseball – and is responsible for whether a day is good or bad.

The prayer that both Luke and Matthew record (in slightly different versions – believed to be in a source document that both used to write their gospels – and a stripped down version from what we say today) – is an asking prayer. It asks G-d for a series of things – bread for each day, debt forgiveness (in proportion to our own behavior), relief from the temptation to do bad things.

- **In addition to bread, debt forgiveness and removal of character tests – are there things you would add to the list of daily petitions to G-d? What do you ask for on a regular basis?** ** I ask for safety for my commuting spouse and my child out in the world filled with risk. I ask for relief of suffering for parents and loved ones – and various populations of the world fairly regularly. I ask for the sanity and compassion of people in power. And I ask for motivation – to get

things done – to be the person I want to be but often am too lazy or too tired to live into.

And then, after the prayer, there is this “suppose” story – a “what if” scenario – where persistence wins the day. I suppose this is to indicate that when praying to G-d one must be persistent in order to see results.

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; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'

Now, for clarity's sake – I'm going to guess that none of us would go to a neighbor's house at midnight to ask for food – even if the food was for someone else. (Yes? No?) If a friend comes to my house late at night – I'm going to suggest they go to bed and we can eat in the morning. Or, if they were really hungry, we'd go to an all-night drive-through – or a 24-hour market. But these weren't options 2000 years ago. And then there is the cultural context.

The cultural things at work in this story are “hospitality” and “honor vs. shame.” To violate the standards of ancient Mediterranean hospitality and not offer guests food and drink upon arrival would bring shame upon the host and his family.

To then go and ask a neighbor to help him fulfill his responsibility risks shame as well – the shame of having to appear needy, the shame of having to ask for something at an inconvenient hour, the shame of putting oneself in the debt of another.

The neighbor is rightfully annoyed by the request at such an hour – but is aware that his own refusal to oblige would be shameful – especially since the requesting party is risking his own reputation by asking.

Both parties risk social ostracism for breaching these codes of behavior. This is serious business.

And remember, this is not a random request for a cup of sugar. This is a request for basic hospitality supplies – and it would bring shame upon that neighbor to come home empty-handed.

So it is a matter of honor to respond to the request, stop the chain of shaming – and show some neighborly, second-hand hospitality.

Our culture is not free of these social codes. They may not be as conscious or explicit – but they persist in a variety of ways.

- **What are some ways in which hospitality is expected of you, of us – even now?** *** Potlucks at church – especially if we have a guest. Offer a beverage on a hot day – or any day. Invite even an uninvited guest to come in and sit down, take their coat, rub their feet (okay, not the feet). Clean the house in anticipation of someone’s arrival. Offer sanctuary or refugee sponsorship. Snack duty at a Little League game. Wedding and funeral receptions.
- **Is there expected behavior in an emergency situation?** *** Stop and assist on a roadside or sidewalk. Offer money or food. Call the police or ambulance. Allow someone to come in and use a phone?? Start filming the situation on your cell phone. Stand and witness – or intervene. Tackle the perp. Shield someone else from danger / bullets / verbal attack. Pray.
- **What are some ways in which we have had to face shaming and retain or regain honor in a relationship or in a community?** *** Back to cleaning the house and being ashamed of piles of projects in every room – not to mention dog hair everywhere. Yelling at my kid in public. Facing up to my mistakes – misunderstandings – bad choices – and apologizing to the parties involved. Expecting more of someone else than I expect of myself. Struggling to explain my religion/faith in a culture where it is represented badly. Struggling to explain my relationship to the current national political climate and candidates.

There is another paragraph that is part of this text. Half of it is deemed by scholars to be sayings by Jesus about the benefits of being persistent – and half to be explanation by the author about G-d’s kind responses to persistent prayer.

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. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? **12** Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? **13** If 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!"

This is Luke's way of wrapping up his point about prayer. I am forced to suggest that we don't always get what we need or want – no matter how persistent we are. But we are more LIKELY to get those things if we ARE tenacious.

- **What are some things we need to be persistent about right now in order to live in a community and world we want to live in? ***** The Political process. Environmental policies. Mutual respect and an effort to understand each other in context. Lifting up lives that matter just as much as ours. Teaching our kids to think beyond literalism and self-interest. Gun Control. The need for hospitality and welcome – not walls and deportation. Our response to persistent requests and needs.

There are more issues and questions that we will need to be in conversation about. Some of those are up for discussion after worship today in our Congregational Conversation. Please stay for about 45 minutes to engage in that dialogue.

I will bring this reflection to a close with the Scholars' Version of Luke's version of Our Common Prayer:

**Father / Abba, your name be revered.
Impose your imperial rule.
Provide us with the bread we need day by day.
Forgive our sins, since we too forgive everyone in debt to us.
And please don't subject us to test after test.**

Amen.

Luke 11:1-13

1 He 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."

2 He 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.**"

5 And 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; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 And 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.' 8 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.

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. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 If 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!"