

July 28, 2019

TEXT: [Luke 11:1-9](#)

TITLE: Persistent Prayer

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Our passage from Luke's gospel has two parts to it—basically a short version of the Lord's Prayer and a short parable about a person inconveniently asking a friend at midnight for a loaf of bread to feed an unexpected houseguest. My sermon on this passage is built around two statements—statements that are true, but that may seem counter-intuitive, reflecting a perspective a bit different from how we usually think of things. The first is this: All life is contingent. Contingent—meaning subject to change, transitory, different from day to day.

Life is ever-changing. We tend to forget this basic fact. We expect that tomorrow will be pretty much the same as today. We'll wake up and have juice or coffee for breakfast. The sun will shine, the car will start, we'll go to work or see friends or watch television, and the earth will continue on its regular orbit through the solar system. And yet every day is full of changes. Within our bodies thousands of cells die and thousands are made new each day. Each of us awakens into a world that is often different from the place in which we went to sleep. The government has changed in Puerto Rico; England has a new Prime Minister; someone we know has lost a job or found a job, has lost a family member or celebrated a child's birth, is newly married or newly divorced. Change happens. Contrary to the idea that every day is just the same as the one just past, our lives are constantly changing—because life is contingent and we must react daily to those changes.

These past days we've celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin began their descent to the moon's surface in the lunar lander, they were dropping about 20 feet per second when they recognized that the place chosen for their landing was littered with boulders. With about 300 feet to go, Armstrong had to take control of the descent and began looking for a better place to land. He slowed down the descent and redirected the lander until he found a place he liked. For 90 seconds, he had to react to the unexpected—to the contingencies of this incredible mission. Finally he lowered the space capsule onto the moon's surface and announced that the Eagle has landed. To which one of the flight engineers back in Houston replied, "Roger. We copy you on the ground. You've got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We are all breathing again. Thanks a lot."

So I'll repeat my earlier phrase: life is contingent. Whether you're driving a lunar lander or driving the family car from East Liberty to Carson Street, you are faced with hundreds of decisions and contingencies that will have to be navigated in order to reach your goal. As people of faith, why is that important? We profess faith in God—God who is eternal, all-knowing, all-loving. God is Lord of all creation, the shaper of life from the beginning of time and every step of the way as we move towards life's culmination at the end of time.

But we are not eternal, not all-knowing, and sadly not all-loving. We can't experience God as God is in Godself, so God came to us in Christ as an expression of God's eternal nature adapted to our contingent nature. Let me put it this way: Christ knew change. Christ grew from a child to an adult. Christ dealt with daily decisions, where to walk to and where to sleep. He felt tired and hungry—just like every one of us. God knew that we couldn't grasp the eternal, so God in Christ accommodated God's nature to our reality. God in Christ fully experienced contingency: seeds changing into wheat plants, lilies blooming one day and dying the next, and all the changes each one of us experiences every day—good and bad things, unexpected joys, difficult sorrows. Christ came into our contingent life so that we might glimpse the promise of God's eternal life.

So life is ever-changing and Jesus came to help us navigate these changes faithfully. Now think back to the start of Luke 11, when one of Jesus' disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us how to pray." If I took a poll and asked you "what is prayer?" you'd most likely say something like "Prayer is talking with God. Prayer is asking something of God." If I asked, "How many of you pray as much as you should?" I doubt whether very many of us, including me, would raise their hands. Or if I asked, "Who is willing to come up here and explain precisely how prayer works?" I bet everyone would avert their gaze and suddenly begin furiously reading the sidebars in today's bulletin to avoid being called on.

Yes, prayer is talking with God. Yes, prayer usually involves asking something of God—"God, keep those I love safe; bring peace in our land; heal my friend who is in the hospital; help me find a job that will actually pay my bills." But if this is the only way you think about prayer—asking something of God—then it quickly leads to other problematic questions: "What happens when my prayer isn't answered? Did I do something wrong? Was I not worthy of God answering my prayer?" Those are very real questions, but they are not questions Christ wants us to fret over because that's simply not the way Christ understands prayer.

The disciples asked "Lord, teach us how to pray." Quite possibly they saw prayer as a contractual negotiation and they wanted to know the precise way to address God in order to get their needs met. Remember, they came out of a Jewish tradition of rituals and sacrifices in which they were to come before God on specific feast days; bring so many goats, lambs or turtledoves to the temple; offer sacrifices with a clean heart and the Lord will bless you and your children. Jesus offers a different model for them in the words of what we've come to know as the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus begins by addressing God with a word of affection—"Father, hallowed be your name" —except he doesn't say "father." He calls God "Abba", literally "Daddy." If the male language is troubling, it could be replaced with "Imma" which means "Momma." To call God Abba or Imma is simply to address God as a child would call out to a parent. The gender is not the point; the relationship is what matters.

But notice what comes next in this prayer. There isn't any fancy or florid language, no begging, pleading or cajoling in order to get God to do what we want. Basically there is

just an acknowledgment of life's contingencies – sharing a short list of concrete needs with our heavenly parent who has promised to be with us as we navigate our days. We need food—God, give us daily bread. We recognize that receiving daily bread includes not only us, but lots of other people (farmers, bakers, grocers) so Lord, help us nurture a world in which the relationships needed for daily bread are also healthy and positive. Next, the prayer reminds us not to ask for more than our share—we are to be just in all our dealings. Lord, let us be willing to forgive debts, just as we pray that you, O God, will forgive us when we fail to show forgiveness and justice as we ought.

And then Jesus' short prayer ends by recognizing that life is ever-changing and not every change is a good one. So whatever path we are on into the future, if possible, Lord, may it not be one of struggle or of trials. Like a child speaking to a parent, we know full well that not everything will go as we wish. Sometimes the doctor's appointment involves getting a shot. Sometimes the car doesn't start, the lunar lander is heading for boulders, the evening news is hard to hear. But life's contingencies cannot defeat God's promises or God's eternal love. Even when surprising things come up—a guest arrives at midnight and needs to be fed—we are able to help even though it means grumbling because we must get out of bed and find a loaf of bread for our neighbor; so imagine how much more God desires to help us, provide for us, and as the prayer asks "save us from the time of trial."

Now comes the second sermon phrase: Prayer is conversation with God as we navigate the unavoidable contingencies of life. Prayer is not cajoling God or negotiating contracts with God. It is communion with God—connecting to God. Thomas Merton once said "prayer is [linking] our freedom with God's ultimate freedom." So it is nothing to feel hesitant about. You shouldn't worry that you cannot do it well, or that your words won't be the right ones. Prayer is like a child talking to a parent as we navigate life's contingencies, life's joys and sorrows; getting those things off our chest by sharing them with someone who cares. Yes, prayer is something that deserves to be part of our daily routine. When we are feeling secure, it is a reminder of God's providence and grace. When we are worried or in need, it reinforces our sense of hope that we are not alone and that this life's realities are never the final word.

So as you say the Lord's Prayer, remember the two phrases I've mentioned.

1) Life is contingent, but God in Christ is fully aware of that fact. And 2) prayer is conversation with God as together we navigate the contingencies of life. It is like a persistent child speaking with a patient, loving parent. Like an uncertain traveler talking with someone who sees precisely where the road ahead is going. Prayer is no more complicated than that—and all the more wonderful for its simplicity. So try it at least twice more today—ask, seek, knock. Thanks be to God.