

“Without Ceasing”
Luke 11:1-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Westminster, Greenville
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In 1955, John Gaunt, Jr. won the Pulitzer Prize in photography for a picture that first appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*.

It’s a picture of a young man and a young woman—
they are husband and wife.

Husband looks out at the ocean.
Wife looks at her husband.

But it’s not a romantic look in their eyes.

The photo is titled “Tragedy by the Sea.” Moments earlier, their one year old boy had been playing by the waters, waded in, and was swept away. They’re standing in the sand as the waves roll in and out, with the unbearable knowledge that they are too late.¹

I thought of that photo after reading our text from Luke for today.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

The photo does not suggest that the couple said a prayer at that moment, but what if they had?

If they had prayed to God for a miracle,
would God have given them what they asked for?

We are continuing our sermon series this morning on “Words of Faith,” and our word for today is “pray”.

¹ I became aware of this photograph through the book *Capture the Moment: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs*, edited by Cyma Rubin and Eric Newton, 2001.

We have spent the past six weeks focusing on words that describe God—we worship a God of hope, a God of grace, a God of surprise, a God of healing, a God of all, and a God of power.

Today, our words shift from God...to OUR RESPONSE to God.

As Christians, one of the ways that we respond to God is to pray.
And what does Jesus say about prayer?

*“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.”*

Beautiful words.

And yet my hunch is that every soul in this room has had the experience of asking God for something that was NOT granted, searching for an answer that was not found...

And frankly, the parable that Jesus tells his disciples about prayer does NOT, at first blush, do a whole lot to clear things up.

You remember the story, right?

A friend badgers another friend into helping him in the middle of the night, as if God is asleep, and God doesn't really want to get up and help us, but if we can just ANNOY God enough with our prayers, God will finally relent so God can go back to sleep.

What in the world is Jesus telling us??

Look, let me invite you not make one-to-one analogies with this story.

What's true in this story is that the friend who knocks on the door LEAVES with something he did not have when he first knocked on the door.

He leaves with bread to eat. He leaves with food to share.
The friend's life is different, because he knocked on the door.
The friend has received a gift from the act of knocking on the door.

I wonder if THIS is what Jesus is telling us about prayer.

I'm reminded of that scene in *Shadowlands*, the movie about C.S. Lewis—

Lewis has just learned that the cancer in his newfound love,
a woman named Joy Gresham, is getting much worse.

Not knowing how much time she has left, Lewis and Joy respond to this news by getting married.

So when a friend—
a friend who knows that Joy has been sick—
asks Lewis how things are going,
Lewis responds, “Good news, I think. Yes, good news.”

Lewis, of course, is talking about being newly married to Joy.
The friend mistakes Lewis' response for good news about Joy's health.

“I know how hard you've been praying,” says his friend. “And now God is answering your prayer.”

“That's not why I pray,” snaps Lewis.
“I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless.
“I pray because the need flows out of me all the time,
waking and sleeping.

It doesn't change God. It changes me.”

Maybe that's the SECOND thing we can say about prayer.

If the first point is that prayer is mysterious and inexplicable and we don't always get what we pray for, maybe the second point is this:

Prayer changes things.
Prayer changes US.

According to Jesus, our lives will be DIFFERENT because we knock on God's door, in prayer.

If we turn to God in thanksgiving, God will change us.
If we bow before God in confession, God will change us.
If we cry out in despair to God, God will be at work to change us.

And someone says, Well, I don't see it.
But does it really matter whether we can see it?

Because God's ability to give us a gift is not dependent on our ability to SEE that gift, or even to REMEMBER that gift.

Let me put it like this.
I want a show of hands here.

How many of you remember the first time someone fed you as a baby?
How many of you remember the first time you had your diaper changed?
How many of you remember all the times that your mother or father picked you up when you were crying, and rocked you to sleep at night?

NO?
Of course not.

But how many of you consider the love that someone showed you when you were too young to even say the word "love"—how many of you consider that love...a gift?

You're allowed to put your hand in the air.

We don't always remember or recognize the gifts we receive in order to make it through this life. But that does not mean that God is not at work, always there to give us good gifts, always there to be generous with God's love...

A member of our church, Mary Ann Cox, told a marvelous story about prayer in our Thursday morning Bible study this week. I asked her permission to share the story with all of you, and she said it was fine.

But let me be more precise—my telling this story is actually a RETELLING of the story. Mary Ann shared this story once before, in *The Harbinger*, back in 2009.

Mary Ann writes that when she was 8 years old and in the third grade, she was in Miss Annie’s class at school.

“In Miss Annie’s third grade, we played bingo on Friday afternoons. Months passed without my winning a single time. One Friday, I decided to pray. “Please, Lord, let me win just one game.”

“Then I won! That afternoon, I won again and again, many, many times.

“Through the years, I pondered that experience of answered prayer but told no one. Statistically, it was a virtual impossibility for this to have been a random occurrence. The God who set the galaxies in motion had stepped into a child’s bingo game! The Creator knew and cared about the thoughts and wishes of his children.”

It was an event, Mary Ann says, that was very formative, and helped shape her faith in God.

Fast forward two and a half decades.

“Twenty-five years later, my mother attended a celebration in the town where we used to live. Miss Annie was there also, and she related one memory to my mother. She said that when I was in third grade, my father went to school one afternoon and told her how much I wanted to win a bingo game. The following Friday, she watched my card and continued to call my numbers, letting me win over and over again.

Mary Ann says that her mother then told her that story, “never knowing how that event had shaped my view of God’s omnipotence and love.

Then Mary Ann asks a very good question:

“Was it only a coincidence that Miss Annie manipulated the game after I prayed to win,
or was the answer to my childish prayer
orchestrated by the power of God even before I prayed it?”

Friends, I don't know how prayer works.

What I do know is this:
Prayer changes things.
Prayer changes us.
And perhaps...can we go this far?
Perhaps...prayer even changes God.

Not by convincing God to do something that God would otherwise not do.

But simply by saying to God, time and again, "Lord, we are in your hands. We belong to you, and are helpless before you, and love you and have faith in you, even when our faith makes no sense at all..."

I believe God is moved by such prayers.
And I believe that God responds to those prayers.

Even when God's response is not clear right way,
I believe that our prayers reveal US right away.

Prayer EXPOSES us.

It uncovers our needs, our hopes—
our greatest joys and our deepest fears.

All of which...is GOOD.
Because that's how God wants us.

Not the cleaned up, pretend version.
But the real version.
The messy US.
The AUTHENTIC us.

One of my preaching professors in seminary was an African-American Baptist minister, Dr. Cleo LaRue. Before Dr. LaRue became a professor at Princeton, he had many years of experience pastoring churches in Texas.

He writes:

“As a young twenty-year old pastor in my first church in Texas,
I remember a family caught in a season of sustained adversity.

“A distraught mother, trying to hold her family together, lay desperately ill in the hospital after a bad car accident. Her husband was unemployed, her son was in jail, her daughter was pregnant out of wedlock, and her creditors were calling the hospital demanding that she pay something on her overdue accounts.

Dr. LaRue says that he went to visit her in her hospital room early one morning, “and after a brief greeting she closed her eyes and stretched her hands toward me for a word of prayer.

At which point, Dr. LaRue says, “I thought I should do something more than merely pray for her. I thought it my place to give her some sound spiritual advice about life. So I said to her, ‘Mozelle, I’m not going to ask God to move your mountain. I’m just going to ask God to give you the strength to climb.’

Then, he says, “This very sick woman immediately put her hands down and opened her eyes.

‘Wait a minute, little preacher,’ she said. ‘Don’t you tie God’s hands this morning. If God wants to move my mountain, you let him. I’m not trying to climb over a mountain, I’m trying to get out from under one.’”²

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

You see, the flip side of all this is that sometimes, we DO receive what we ask for. Sometimes—not all the time, but sometimes—we ask for something from God, and we receive this gift we could not give ourselves, and it absolutely takes our breath away...

² As told by Dr. Cleo LaRue in his sermon, “The University of Adversity,” October 26, 2008, on Day 1, found at http://day1.org/1115-university_of_adversity.

Have you ever had that experience?

That HUMBLING experience of praying and praying, and then...in a way that was completely BEYOND your ability control...

something in your life changed...

and it was good...

and it was God's gift?

The Rev. John Mulder is the former president of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, and a lifelong Presbyterian.

“One might say I was predestined to be a Presbyterian,” he writes.

“I was born, baptized and confirmed in the Presbyterian Church. I was ordained to be a Presbyterian minister. I taught for seven years at Princeton Theological Seminary, and then became the president of Louisville...

Then, he writes, on September 11, 2002, “I crashed.”

What caused the crash?

An undiagnosed bipolar illness, as well as “a pattern of drinking that had progressed into full-blown alcoholism.”

“I had to resign as president of Louisville,” Mulder says, “and in the following year I struggled to deal with the physical, spiritual and moral wreckage of my life.”

Eventually, Mulder went to a rehab program.

And all throughout the program, he kept praying one prayer:

“Please Lord, forgive me.”

For months, he prayed that prayer.

And nothing happened.

He felt no closer to God.

Finally, Mulder says he gave up that prayer, and without knowing why, he prayed a different prayer:

“God open me up. Please open me up.”

One morning, as Mulder was making breakfast for himself, by himself, he describes being surrounded by white light.

“It was not blinding or frightening but warm and embracing. At first, there were no voices or sounds, but as the light subsided, I eventually heard, ‘You are not alone.’ And then the light faded.”

This experience, says Mulder, made all the difference.

Later on, the staff at the treatment center told him that this event marked the beginning of his recovery.

He has since reconciled with those he has wronged, including his wife. And as Mulder puts it, “It all began with a simple prayer:

‘God, open me up.’”³

**“Ask, and it will be given you;
search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened...”**

Friends, I cannot stand here this morning and tell you that you will receive EXACTLY what you’re praying for right now.

I can tell you that according to Jesus, the most important part about prayer...is our persistence.

Keep knocking, says Jesus.

Don’t stop, says Jesus.

Or as Paul told the Thessalonians, “pray without ceasing.”

Because the one who stands on the other side of our prayers is not disgruntled neighbor who wants to go back to sleep.

³ “Finding God,” by The Rev. John Mulder, in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, June 18, 2013.

It's God.

The God who spun the planets is the God who loves you, and delights in you, and is **READY**—no matter how put together or messy your life feels right now—this God is **EAGER** to hear from you...

Do you believe that?

What will you say, the next time you talk to God?

Don't hold back.

Don't hold **ANYTHING** back...

Amen.