

Date: Sunday July 25, 2010

Scripture: Luke 11:1-13

Title: “Midnight with a Friend”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus is describing prayer to the disciples and uses a wonderful story to make his point.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): To take prayer serious, we don’t have to be serious.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

Long before the mega churches burst on to the suburban scene with fancy electronic signs, churches used steeples and bells to attract the attention of people. And not just any steeple; the taller the better so they would be noticed from miles away. We have an example of that right here in our neighborhood.

There was a church in a town with a very tall steeple that was noticed from far away. It was perfect except for one thing – the bell wouldn’t ring. The church leaders put their heads together to try and come up with a solution but nothing worked. Then one day, a physically small man showed up at the church and said he had heard about the trouble. He thought he could help. He told the church leaders that he would climb the steeple and would be able to ring the bell. They decided to let him try.

So up the steeple he went the next Sunday morning. Now what he did sounds kind of painful, but it worked. The little guy got back from the bell a few feet and then took off running and ran smack dab into the bell with his head. Lo and behold,

ding dong, it worked. The church hired him to ring the bell every Sunday.

Well the third Sunday morning the little guy was in position by the bell and at 9:25, it was a summer Sunday, he took off running and just as he did a big gust of wind came up, causing the bell to move so much that the man missed the bell completely, went running out of the tower, and fell to the ground.

A crowd gathered around him. One person said, “We need to get him help.” A second person asked, “What’s his name?” A third person replied, “I don’t know, but his face kind of rings a bell” (Miller). As I have said before and will say again, it is good to laugh and to laugh in church. And if we are to take Jesus’ teaching seriously, it is important that we laugh. I am convinced Jesus had a good sense of humor and today’s passage from Luke is one reason why I believe so.

Now as the passage opens, Jesus 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” (Luke 11:1, NRSV). The request is simple enough. It is a request anyone might make at some time. Perhaps today is not the exact day when you would say, “Teach us to pray,” but store the thought away that you might say such a thing because the time comes when each of us has or will be saying in our own way, “Teach us to pray.”

We might say this when terrible sadness invades our lives or great confusion blasts us from our stronghold. It might just be that the routine of the passing days is enough, and soon a long-neglected part of ourselves yearns, “Teach us to pray.” We

may not use those exact words, of course. We may not even think of prayer at all. Somehow, though, we will long to connect with the ultimate power of the universe. With so many distractions clamoring for our attention we find that we want to reach out to something real. We don't quite know how to do that. But the request, "Teach us to pray," points us in that direction.

This is what is happening with the disciples when they make the request of Jesus. They have been watching someone for whom prayer is alive, someone who has what we might call a spiritual life. When we admire a friend's clothing or a relative's vehicle, we might ask where they got it so we could get it. We might be impressed and admire the way another person lives their life. We want to try and be like them. Luke tells us that "Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples'" (Luke 11:1, NRSV). They watched him, admired him, and wanted to be like him.

Now make no mistake, such a request does have some seriousness. It doesn't take much to ask where a piece of clothing was purchased, but to ask someone about living their life; to say, "Tell me, how you pray." requires risk. That question translates a conversation into the language of intimacy. To ask about prayer is to reveal something of ourselves and to ask a friend how she or he prays risks something as well. Too talk of prayer introduces a serious subject, one seldom raised in ordinary conversation and the result of such a conversation can be life changing.

The American theologian and UCC'er Reinhold Niebuhr was preaching for a vacationing pastor in New England during the Second World War. Following the sermon Niebuhr prayed a brief little prayer, something he scribbled down in the study before he came into the sanctuary. Afterwards, a worshipper approached Niebuhr telling him how much that prayer had meant. Niebuhr, thinking nothing of it, pulled the small scrap of paper out of his Bible and gave it to the man. The next year that worshipper used that prayer in Christmas cards. Others picked it up and used it and reused and now it has become doubtlessly one of the best known prayers in this country. As soon as I speak the words, you will recognize it; some of you know it by heart: *“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

Just a few words scratched out on a summer morning, but the right words for the moment and for our lives. Later, after the prayer was so widely published, Niebuhr himself was not even sure whether he had composed it or had simply remembered it from another source (Fox). Was it his or someone else's? It is still a question discussed at times to this day. But the real question becomes, to whom does a prayer belong? The answer, I believe, is that every prayer is our prayer. The act of praying out loud gives a prayer not only to God but to all of us.

Jesus gives us a life changing prayer in this story from Luke. Jesus has people gathered around him who take prayer seriously. They ask him how to pray, and he tells them with a prayer: When you pray, say: *“Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for*

we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial” (Luke 11:2-4, NRSV). Oh, so that’s how to pray, the disciples nod solemnly. That’s how to pray.

I like how Pastor Patrick Willson describes this scene. He writes that as Luke recounts this story, Jesus can see how serious the disciples are, how very, very serious. So Jesus goes on to tell them a story. Suppose your friend comes unexpectedly to visit late at night. Your friend has been out on the road all day and half the night with nothing to eat, so what are you going to do? You’re going to put something on the table for your friend, aren’t you? Isn’t that what friends do for each other? Sure, the disciples nod their heads. We know about friendship. That’s what any friend would do.

There’s a problem, however: you don’t have anything in the house to eat, Jesus says. The refrigerator is empty, the pantry is bare. What are you going to do? You go to another friend. That’s what friends do. The disciples nod. You run next door. That’s what friends do.

Now next door is the typical first century Palestinian friend bedded down in his typical first century Palestinian house. It has one room. Mom, dad, all six children, half a dozen chickens, the dog, and a goat all sleep together in that room. That’s the way it is if you live like most people lived. If you were wealthier, you had a spare bedroom for the goat.

So you pound on the door asking for bread. What’s your friend going to do?

He's going to give you some bread. If he won't give you bread just because you're such good friends, he'll give you bread just to get rid of you because if you keep pounding on the door you'll end up waking up the dog and if that happens the goat gets up and if that happens the chickens start running around and then everyone is finished sleeping for the night. So you'll get what you ask for.

This is a funny story that Jesus tells. Think about it; Neighbors scurrying from house to house and chickens and goats and dogs and kids all running around. It is intended to be funny and to get people laughing. Jesus tries to loosen up his disciples on this subject of prayer. We, of course, like the disciples, insist on being very serious. Biblical commentators, one after another, write with great seriousness about this parable. "Does this mean that we have to knock for God?" "Maybe it means that God gives only grudgingly to us?" or "That God gives us daily bread only to be rid of the nuisance of us?"

"Good grief," Jesus says, "can't you take a joke (Willson)? I thought you said you knew about friendship." That's what most of prayer is about: friendship. Being with a friend; just being there. And think of all the things, the wonderful things that happen with a friend: Laughing so hard it hurts; chatting over a cup of coffee or tea, taking in a movie, telling one another about troubles, and talking on the phone for all hours of the night.

Doesn't that sound like friendship? Being with someone you just enjoy being with. Someone you can talk to. Someone you can be silent with; someone who shares your hopes, your dreams, and your fears.

When we are with a friend and talking about our hopes, all the dreams grow bigger and bolder and more imaginative and seem more possible than ever. When we talk about fears they don't seem as dark and awful as they did before.

With a friend we feel we can be ourselves. We feel better about being who we are; maybe even more alive. When we are alone we can forget so many things, there are things we don't know, and we might get more easily confused. With a friend we remember who we are and why we are and where we are and where we are going and what it all means.

Sometimes with a friend we might say something incredibly stupid or do something incredibly stupid, and friends forgive us for being incredibly stupid. Sometimes the relationship even grows stronger because of a brokenness that occurs and the healing that follows. With friends, we've probably all started a conversation saying, "I don't know anyone else I can talk to about this...." And really, isn't that what prayer is all about?

Today's good news is that for people who want to take prayer seriously, Jesus tells an outrageous story suggesting that to take prayer seriously may not be taking prayer seriously at all. People who approach prayer with utter seriousness may think that God must be approached with precise strategies and special words. Not so, says Jesus. Suppose there was a friend who came to see us at midnight. What would we do? We would do exactly what was needed without any worry. Just the same, prayer can be that easy, that effortless, and that graceful. And like friendship, that full of goodness, joy, and laughter. Prayer and friendship, I hope some of these

ideas ring a bell. Let us pray.

Lord,

We are grateful for our relationship with you and knowing you as friend. As our friend we can share our experiences with you, especially our moments of mirth.

With thanks for giving us this gift of prayer, we pray joyfully in your name. Amen.

Offering: Let us think about our morning offering like we are giving to a friend.

The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, we ask that you accept and bless this that we give and that you empower our efforts to share these gifts. So we pray, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth into the world children of God blessed and secured by the love, the joy, and the lifeline of the Lord. Go forth, Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Fox, Richard; *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*; New York: Pantheon Books; 1985.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Miller, Paul – Editor; “World’s Greatest Collection of Church Jokes”; Barbour Publishers: Uhrichsville, OH; 2003.

Willson, Patrick J.; *Lectionary Homiletics*: www.goodpreacher.com; 2010.