

Proper 12 C 2022

Luke 11: 1-13

In my experience, the best antidote for overcomplicating your prayer life is to spend time with a small child. I was thinking about this as I heard my daughter was getting ready to go back to grad school at the end of August, and all the while I was thinking that it seemed like hours ago that I gave her her first bath, and how quickly and directly she gave me her opinion about that experience. As a newly-minted uncle I am re-learning how simple the needs of babies are and how directly and persistently they communicate them. Both ideas are at the center of Jesus' advice about prayer, the only advice he offers in all of scripture about how to pray. For those who are familiar with the writer Anne LaMott, whose favorite prayers are, "Please, please, please," and "Thank you, thank you, thank you," Jesus' own approach is a little more sophisticated, but as we know from the Lord's Prayer, all the verbs are in the imperative: give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses, do not bring us into the time of trial. They are as direct and persistent as they can be, and it is hard even for Anglicans to complicate, we who are so in love with our prayer forms and our polished, elaborate prose.

Prayer, as Jesus teaches his disciples, is about intimacy, about mutual delight in the one praying and the one being addressed. We are used to thinking of prayer as being an act in which we try to convince God to do something we think God would not do otherwise, that God had better things to do than to worry about our own petty concerns, no matter how important they seem to us. I was thinking about this idea, which many people think of as dread or awe, as I was looking at the images from the James Webb telescope of the light from stars sent into the universe four million years ago, an invitation to comprehend, "the breadth and height and length and depth...of the fulness of God," as Paul puts it. But if all the emphasis in our culture has been on the transcendence of God, the advice of Jesus is almost exclusively on intimacy, the enjoyment God takes in us and that the relationship should be on mutual fulfillment.

I am not for a moment saying that our prayer life should not be reverent, respectful and regular; I do believe that we are often afraid to be utterly honest in our life before God because we believe that our desires are small in the huge sweep of the world's concerns. But Jesus emphasizes familiarity, addressing God as one would speak to a beloved. Nowhere is this clearer than in his counsel about persistence. The neighbor in the parable he offers is indeed shameless, violating all the unspoken rules of hospitality in a Semitic culture, the man refusing to get out of bed to help a friend in need. Unspoken behind these words is the question, "Could any of this happen to you," with the assumption that God would be infinitely more ready to meet a legitimate need. The key is in the persistence. All the words that follow the parable are based on this advice: ask and keep on asking, search and search again, knock and keep on knocking. God does not ignore a legitimate need of his creatures and we do not need to be concerned about being presumptuous.

The earliest Christian communities understood this idea of persistence being a part of a healthy relationship with God, especially concerning our neighbors and those we love. Abba Sisoës, a desert father who saw the illness of one of his own disciples, made the prayer, "God, whether you will or whether you will not, I will not let you alone until you have healed him," after which his disciple was healed. What was behind these words, however, was a great deal of honesty, supported by a lifetime spent listening to God; we cannot be worried that what we are asking is suitable or respectful or somehow worthy of God's attention. If you have spent time in a cancer ward, have ministered to families with children who are ill or are around the dying, you do not worry much about respectability.

The ancients knew this as much as we do; if our prayer is to be a conversation, it is to be among friends and friends learn to be direct.

At the heart of the words of Jesus about prayer is the issue of the terrible gravity with which we often approach our lives with God; it hinges on a question that, if you are like me, we often ask ourselves: does God take real, genuine joy in me as one of God's creatures? Not, does God forgive me or somehow put up with me but does God delight in me? It's not an academic matter. We resist this idea of a friendship with God, even intimacy with God, because we are quite sure that God has better things to do. But the image of love between a child and parent is persistent, both in the way Jesus addresses his own prayers to the way the ancients thought about it. One of them spoke about it in detail: "a baby, even though it is powerless to accomplish anything or with its own feet to go to its mother, still it rolls and makes noises and cries as it seeks its mother. And she picks it up and fondles it and feeds it with great love. This is also what God the Lover of humankind, does to the person that comes to God and ardently desires God".

My favorite response to the question, however, is a mural in the basement of a church where a friend of mine was rector for many years. Below it is a caption that says, "Let the little children come to me, for to such as these belong the kingdom of God". In the picture, Jesus is seated while kids dressed in early 1960's play-clothes climb all over him. And these are real kids, some needing to blow their noses and many of whom are carrying ice-cream cones and leaving big chocolate smears all over his robes. None of the mess changes the smile of Jesus one iota. I had the image of this mural in my head during ice-cream day at the camp, a perfect antidote for the obsessive seriousness of our life with God. It was the picture of what I believe most of our lives with God are: messy, joyful and holy, all at once.

Taking Jesus at his word, I do what I can to make my own prayers as direct as possible. My daughter and her brother are both in their twenties now, but I am just as undeviating in my prayers for them as when they were small. I can hardly do otherwise, as their needs are as immediate as my own. And I am persistent, especially when things get messy in their lives and my own. But I know how deeply God loves them and will not leave them. That is the promise that God leaves us, the persistent, joyful listener, and all we can do is say, "thank you, thank you, thank you."