

Tenacious Prayer

Daniel 10:1-5, 10-14, 18-21; Luke 11:1-13

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, (July 24) 2022

Kyle Childress

Nothing can save us that is possible;

We who must die demand a miracle.

-W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being*

This morning we begin where we should begin every morning. With the Lord's Prayer. I share with you this extended quote on the Lord's Prayer from Frederick Buechner, the late writer and preacher/theologian.

In the Episcopal order of worship, the priest sometimes introduces the Lord's Prayer with the words, "Now, as our Savior Christ hath taught us, we are bold to say..." The word bold is worth thinking about. We do well not to pray the prayer lightly. It takes guts to pray it at all. ...

"Thy will be done" is what we are saying. ... We are asking God to be God. We are asking God to do not what we want, but what God wants. We are asking God to make manifest the holiness that is now mostly hidden, to set free in all its terrible splendor the devastating power that is now mostly under restraint. ... Boldness indeed. To speak those words is to invite the tiger out of the cage, to unleash a power that makes atomic power look like a warm breeze. ...

*It is only the words "Our Father" that make the prayer bearable. If God is indeed something like a father, then as something like children maybe we can risk approaching him anyway (from *Whistling in the Dark*).*

Our Gospel reading this morning begins with Jesus praying and when he had finished, the disciples come up and ask him to teach them to pray. We know from all four Gospels that Jesus was being inundated by crowds of people seeking healing and hope. We know that Jesus frequently withdrew to a quiet place, somewhere off by himself, so he could not only hear himself think, but so he could focus and pray – so he could spend time with God. Without his time with God, talking with God, and more importantly, listening to God, Jesus would have been overwhelmed and exhausted, bereft of power. The danger for Jesus, just like for all of us, when we are spiritually exhausted, and the wells of grace and mercy and love run dry, we slowly give into fear, resentment, and despondency. Then we become that which we oppose, and we become caught in the web of darkness and despair. So, Jesus spends time with God. A lot of time.

Prayer is about being with God. With knowing God. And it is not easy knowing God. We don't start off knowing all we need to know about God or about prayer.

It is why we have to be taught to pray. We have to be trained and taught by someone who knows what they're doing. Praying in the Way of Jesus is to learn to pray for what Jesus prays for, having our vision shaped so we learn to see the world like Jesus saw the world, and therefore being able to engage the world like Jesus.

That's why I encourage you to say the Lord's Prayer with the whole community every Sunday morning whether you believe it or not. Just do it. Practice it. If you don't know God or even believe in God, eventually by

participating in this prayer with the rest of the community of faith, you begin to know God.

I also encourage you to pray the Lord's Prayer daily. You might start the day with the Lord's Prayer or end the day with the Lord's Prayer, or pray it as a bookend to the day, both at the beginning and at the end. But pray it. Enter God's presence. Be with God. Join with God. But do it! And stick with it!

Jesus teaches his disciples this model prayer, the Lord's Prayer. Then he tells a brief parable about a friend going over to a neighbor's house in the middle of the night asking for some loaves of bread, saying, "I have unexpected guests who have arrived and nothing to feed them." The neighbor yells, "Don't bother me! It's the middle of the night. Everyone is in bed. Go home." But Jesus says that the friend won't shut up and keeps pounding on the door. Eventually the neighbor gives him some bread – not because of friendship but because of the man's persistence.

Over in Luke 18, Jesus teaches on prayer again, giving the disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart. He tells the parable of the persistent widow who keeps coming demanding justice from an uncaring judge. Eventually, he gives her justice, not because he is just or good, but because she won't give up. She is persistent.

Persistence, the ability to stick to it. Never giving up. Every day. Every morning or every evening or both. It is why, for instance, for the monastic tradition of praying seven times a day: matins, lauds, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline – based on Psalm 119:164 "Seven times a day I praise you."

I'm not suggesting that you follow the monastic tradition of praying what's called the daily office or the liturgy of the hours. What I'm saying, is that prayer takes persistence and a kind of dogged perseverance, in helping us be freed from our addiction and possession by darkness and sin, which keep us enthralled to the powers that dominate and are killing us, killing our relationships, and killing this planet. And when we are freed, then who knows what will happen?! God works in us and through us and beyond us in ways we never imagine!

If alcohol addicts attend AA meetings several times a week, especially when starting off, then how much more should we be praying and attending worship together. The powers of domination have us addicted and possessed. It often shows up in depression and despair in us and around us. For my purposes this morning, depression is clinical, and we usually deal with it with counseling, medicine, exercise, and such. There is plenty to be depressed about and for those of us who love God, love others, and love this earth, we probably should be depressed about our situation and this world. But this morning, I'm more concerned about despair. Despair is a theological term; it is a sin. Despair is about giving up on God, saying there is no hope. Only by persistent prayer are the tentacles of darkness and despair loosened and we are freed. Only by persistent, persevering prayer and worship do we learn to live by new habits and see in the light of Christ.

Saint Thomas Aquinas said we must learn to pray and live by "tentatio." And elegant Latin word which means "stubborn trust in the midst of trials." And from it we get words like tenacious and tenacity.

Aquinas said, “Prayer, stubborn trust in the midst of trial, and meditation all make the theologian.” It also makes us Christian and makes us the church.

Tenacious prayer. Persistent, persevering, willing to go day after day and face God and face the principalities and the powers and struggle. It’s why Buechner reminded us at the beginning of the sermon that it takes boldness to pray, especially the Lord’s Prayer. In Buechner’s words, “We do well not to pray the prayer lightly. It takes guts to pray it at all.”

We middle class mostly White people are polite and think prayer is polite. We do not think of prayer as tenacious struggle, and we certainly do not think of it as impertinent and brash. But in the Bible, it is.

Let me give you an example: I bought this stole I’m wearing in the Holy Land when I was there several years ago on a grant with about 15 other clergy. I knew that if you bought anything in the market in Old Jerusalem, you needed to be prepared to haggle. It simply caught me off-guard when I was in a shop attached to a church looking at this clerical stole. The clerk in the store wanted to haggle. I simply asked, “How much for this stole?” because the prices were not to be seen. He said something like fifty American dollars. I put it back on the shelf and said, “That’s too much for me.” He quickly responded, “Are you clergy? For you, for clergy only \$40.” Then I realized I was expected to haggle. We went back and forth for a while, and I think I bought it for \$25.

Here in the U.S. I think of haggling like arguing with a used-car salesman who is trying to take advantage of me. It’s all about the money, and it is a practice I detest. But I learned that haggling in the Middle East is an ancient cultural

tradition that is about much more than the price or the money. It is about building social relationships and mutual respect and admiration. To bargain back and forth says, “We are getting to know one another, and we are learning respect for one another.”

Prayer in the Bible is haggling. It is arguing with God and God arguing with us. Abraham haggles with God over whether Sodom will be destroyed or not (Gen. 18). Moses argues with God on Mt. Sinai when the people make the golden calf and God becomes fed up with their idolatry. Moses refuses to let God destroy them. Back and forth they go, arguing, haggling, pleading, cajoling, and then it says, “The Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people (Ex. 32:14). God repented. God changed. And here in Luke is this little parable about the man beating on his neighbor’s door in the middle of the night until the neighbor gives him what he wants and then also the parable of the persistent widow. Haggling.

What this means is that God hears our prayers, listens, and responds. God changes God’s mind. When we pray the future is not closed. Suddenly, there is an opening to new possibility – God works, leaders do change their minds, politicians change their votes, social and political movements catch fire and spread, marriages are made whole, walls come down, bridges are built, waters are parted, hearts are changed, anxiety is calmed, people are healed, despair gives way to hope, darkness is overcome by light, and evil is defeated. It happens.

Karl Barth said, To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

So, we pray tenaciously and persistently and boldly! Notice, that the phrases in the Lord's Prayer are in the imperative. It is not "if thy kingdom comes" or "will your kingdom come." Instead, it is audacious "thy kingdom done; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

This is prayer with someone we trust and respect. And God trusts and respects us. We argue, haggle, we remind God that God's kingdom must come – which means that the kingdoms and empires that are destroying the planet must go. We pray for deliverance from evil and we persist, we don't give up, we are assertive and tenacious. We struggle.

But that's not all. The reading from Daniel is a strange story to our ears. It is set in Babylon with the people of God in exile. They are in exile and after a generation they have become comfortable with becoming pretty good Persians and Babylonians, but they are losing their faith in the true God, Yahweh and losing their identity as God's people. In chapters 9 and 10, Daniel is struggling with God. He pours out his fears and his anger, his anguish and despair.

Daniel has been fasting and praying for 21 days when he receives a vision of an angel coming to him, saying, "Daniel, don't be afraid. Take courage. God has heard your prayers ever since the first day you humbled yourself to gain understanding. I have come in answer to your prayers."

Biblical scholar Walter Wink asks why did the angel take 21 days to show up, if the prayer was heard the first day? According to this old story, the angel, or the spirituality of the empire of Persia/Babylon opposed the angel of the Lord. For twenty-one days they fought, until the archangel Michael showed up and took over

the fight, freeing this angel of the Lord to get away and deliver this message to Daniel.

Hear me on this. Do not let this mythological story get in the way of what's going on here and what we need to hear. Walter Wink reminds us that prayer is not just between God and us. The powers of domination are also involved. Prayer puts us in the middle of the fight.

Now we don't have time to unpack the bad teachings, useless teachings, and downright misleading teachings about what Paul calls the Principalities and Powers. Do not think in terms of individual demons or devils, instead learn to think of the spirituality of systems that dominate, isolate, diminish, and destroy. The spirituality or angels of these systems oppose God and all the people and things of God (see Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, chapter 16 "Prayer and the Powers," pp. 297-317).

It takes boldness to pray because we contend with these powers. It takes tenacious persistence to pray because we are rattling God's cage, so to speak, imploring God to act, to intervene, but also because as Paul says, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). Prayer is engaging in the struggle against these powers of domination and destruction. No wonder it takes boldness to pray!

Daniel persists in praying. He is tenacious. He stubbornly trusts in the midst of trials and so must we. If it takes 21 days, so be it! Or 21 months or 21 years!

Tom Long tells the story about a young boy named Frank who was walking along the bank of the Mississippi River when he noticed another boy about his age wrestling with a homemade raft. He asked him, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm going to take this raft out to that island in the middle of the river. I dare you to go with me!" Well, Frank couldn't resist the dare, so he scrambled down the bank and got on the raft. They rowed out to the middle of the river, but the current was too strong. As they approached the island, the raft broke up and sank. They could barely swim to the island. And there they were, abandoned on an island, late in the afternoon. Nobody knew where they were. What would they do?

Right at that moment, one of those paddle-wheel steamers came down the river and Frank ran to the edge of the island and began screaming and waving his hands, "Help! Help!" The other boy said, "Don't waste your breath. They can't hear you and even if they could, they wouldn't pay any attention to boys like us. So quit jumping around and waving your arms." Just at that moment the paddlewheel steamer turned toward the island. The boy said to Frank, "Wow! They're coming. They saw us and actually paid attention to us and are coming!" And Frank said, "Well, there's something you don't know. The captain of that boat is my Daddy!"

Back to the Buechner quote: "It is only the words 'Our Father' that make the prayer bearable. If God is indeed something like a father, then as something like children maybe we can risk approaching him anyway."

So let us take the risk. Let's pray boldly, tenaciously, never giving up.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.