

Pentecost 7, Year C  
Luke 11:1-13  
July 28, 2019

I have long disliked the second half of this passage from Luke, so that of course is the reason I have chosen to use it as the source of my sermon this morning. The reason for my dislike is that there are two common responses to this passage, and neither of them have ever seemed satisfactory to me, though I have often found myself responding in one of the two ways. The first is to feel heartened by it. Jesus is telling us that if we just persist in prayer long enough we will get what we want, no matter what our present circumstances might be. Prosperity preachers have taken an extreme view and concluded from it that if you are poor either you want to be, or are not faithful enough. Either way, it is your fault. Most Christians subscribe to some version of this interpretation. Lots of people soften it by taking account of social and economic circumstances, but most of the time most people say that God does indeed give us what we need in a material and emotional sense, and they are encouraged by it.

My response has been of a second type, which could be summarized as “how dare you, Jesus?” Are we to be supposed to believe that all the hurt, marginalized, sick, bereaved, poverty stricken people of this world are simply insufficient in faith, and that if they persist, you will make sure they get what they need?” There are billions of people in this world who have spent their entire lives subsisting on far less than they need to live a quiet and dignified life, and for the vast majority of them this has nothing to do with their energy, their persistence, their faith, and a great deal to do with life under corrupt governments, at times working hand in hand with multinational corporations to make sure that things stay pretty much exactly the way they are. Most of

us here don't experience this directly, because at the material level we have a great deal more than we need. But deep pain and profound loss have characterized most of our lives at least some of the time.

Some people never overcome that; some are destroyed by that pain and loss, despite their prayers, despite their persistence. So indeed, how dare Jesus say "Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you."? From what I have seen not only in 36 years of ordained ministry, but from my experience of this world, that is not always the way it works out. I have been joined in this response by any number of people I know who have abandoned faith in God, despite surviving various crises in their lives, because they did not get what they believed they needed. For these good people, if faith means believing something you know to be untrue, then the task is not to learn to believe what feels like a lie, but to learn to live without faith. And in that abandonment they find, strangely enough, what they need to survive. At least they have some sense of living honestly and without illusions.

Both these responses arise from the belief that Jesus is indeed saying that God will take care of our emotional and material needs if we only persist long enough and hard enough. A careful look at this passage reveals that both of these responses - one of which, I remind you, has been mine - are rooted in a misunderstanding of it.

Begin by noting the assumption about God that runs throughout these verses. That assumption is that you are loved, and loved without conditions. It does not matter who you are, where you come from, who hates you, what your situation in life is, you are loved by God, no matter what is happening to you. Ills and misfortune in this life do not result from God punishing you for being bad, and wealth and health are not rewards for persistence. Now notice

what is being actually being offered on the basis of that love. It is not relief from your problems, no matter how trivial or severe, it is not material abundance, it is not emotional stability. It is “The Holy Spirit.” What is being offered in this passage is the presence of God’s spirit in your life, no matter what is happening. In this passage anyway, that is all that is being offered. The metaphor about opening the door to a friend long after it is otherwise too late to do that must not distract us; this passage explodes the notion that God is waiting for us to ask in the right way in order to take care of us in the manner to which we would like to become accustomed, and saying instead that all of us, no matter who we are, get the same thing from God, and that is God’s presence, God’s life and Spirit.

To put it bluntly, God is not waiting for us to ask for the dice to be loaded on our behalf. It does not matter how persistent in faith you are, God is not going to give you that Mercedes Benz, or that color TV or that night on the town, Janis Joplin’s wonderful parody of religion notwithstanding. A variety of circumstances, including the social stratum into which you were born, your access to good education, the luck of being born in a country which encourages you to find good jobs, and provides the economic freedom to create them, and of course your diligence in working hard at that job, may indeed combine to get you all of those things, but that is a different matter. Nor is God going to make sure neither you nor anyone you love gets sick, becomes disabled, or dies too young. Faith, even deep and persistent faith, exempts no one from the experience of our common humanity.

What persistent faith does, according to this passage, is to open our spirits to the presence of God with us no matter what else is going on. When life is difficult that awareness requires a remarkable persistence, sometimes even a lot of screaming in the dark. I know of few things

harder in life than to watch all your beliefs about God and what God will do for you shattered by the excruciating experiences that periodically happen for no reason we can imagine. To persist at that moment, to not give up, requires a remarkable faith that leads to a remarkable place. In our deepest sense of being alone and lost, persistence in faith reveals that we are not alone, and not lost. My hope is that none of you have ever been that far gone, but if you have, and if you are here, then you know that what this passage promises is true. God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask for it.

Because that is true, we need to understand what we are asking for. Here we might just glance at Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer with which our passage begins. It speaks of receiving daily bread, not enough for tomorrow, or the day after, just enough for today. Whether you see that as a metaphor or more literally it is shocking. To have next to nothing, to have no idea where your next meal is coming from is to have enough in the terms of this prayer.

The prayer asks for forgiveness in the same measure we forgive others. If we want mercy, then this prayer says to become merciful. If we want to receive compassion, become compassionate. This prayer isn't simply saying that we ought to treat others the way we want to be treated, though that is an implication. It is saying more deeply that we are all in exactly the same position before God and each other, and the sooner we recognize that truth, the sooner we can become involved in the real work of faith, which is to honor everyone as a fellow human being who deserves to have enough for no other reason than that we are all loved by God in the same way.

But this, at least in the terms of this passage, is what it means to have the Holy Spirit. Thus, to have the Holy Spirit is to destroy all the other means by which we find ourselves and

secure our spot in this world, and frankly, who wants that? From my point of view the Church Pension Fund is a fully adequate substitute for the Holy Spirit in my life, and I suspect I am not alone in that. That is why this passage stresses the necessity for persistence, and why its appeal is to those for whom life is hard and the options are few. Most of us don't give up our faith in things until they are wrenched from us, regardless of whatever else our piety might tell us to say. But here is the promise of this passage, when life wrenches the things you believe you need from you, if you abandon the notion that God's purpose is to make you as comfortable as you were before, and if you persist in demanding from God the one thing you truly need, you will get it. For you will a deep and abiding sense of God's presence in your life, and that, we are promised here today, will be enough, because you will learn to love as you have been loved, to be merciful and to be compassionate. You will know what it means to be fully human, and therefore sense in yourself the divinity of God. Maybe that is enough.