

Jesus' Practical Wisdom of Persistence

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. David B. Wolf

St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda, MD

The Eighth Sunday of Pentecost,¹ 27 July 2025. Text: Luke 11:1-13

I don't know about you but, most of the time, I don't think about *how* I pray. I think more about *what* or *who* I need to pray for. Does that resonate with anyone? Can I see a show of hands? (Just about everyone did). Yes, I think it's a default for the human condition, and I think that's why Luke tells us in the Gospel lesson for today, that "one of Jesus' disciples" asked for some instruction on HOW to pray. And, I imagine Jesus was pleased for the opportunity to address a central question about the practical wisdom about prayer and how it works in our lives in the Spirit. And maybe I've been in Washington too long (being a recovering lawyer before I was a priest) but I heard this question as if we were in a press conference and the question came from "*a reporter*" (rather than "a disciple" to Jesus: "When Jesus finished what he had to say, *a disciple* (read: "*a reporter*") asked him: "Jesus, can you teach US to pray as John taught HIS disciples?"

This "reporter-disciple" was astute enough to ask a question that gets at the heart of prayer in the informal, conversational sense (vs. the formal, liturgical sense), the sense in which we are asked and invited by Jesus to "pray without ceasing." It points to an underlying reality that, ideally, praying is living and living is praying. Does that make sense? Can I get an "*Amen*?" (I said to the congregation to loosen them up and get "The Amens" going!)

So what does that look like? To illustrate this, Jesus shares a weird story², which turns out to be a pivotal story. He says,³ "Imagine what would happen if you went to a friend in the middle of the night and said, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread. An *old* friend⁴ traveling through just showed up, and I don't have a thing on hand.' Your friend, inside his home, answers from this bed saying the kids are down for the night and that he really can't get up to give you three loaves of bread.

Jesus continues, "BUT if you stand your ground, knocking and waking up all the neighbors – if you're PERSISTENT – your friend will finally get up and give you what you need for this *old* friend [who has just popped in]." Jesus is saying that as in life, prayer; and, as in prayer, life: "Be *persistent*! Be *direct*! Ask for what you *need*! Don't beat around the bush! Or, as Peterson puts it: "Don't bargain with God! This is not a cat and mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in!"⁵

¹ Note that my practice and a minority of churches in The Episcopal Church USA take the position that there are Sundays OF Pentecost, not just Sundays AFTER Pentecost since, otherwise, there is no *season* of Pentecost – and clergy generally only wear red ON Pentecost!

² Jesus tells a parable. Not all stories are parables, but all parables are stories.

³ In my preaching, I draw from two versions of the Bible: The New Oxford Annotated Bible, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Oxford University Press: 1991 and The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, by Rev. Dr. Eugene H. Peterson NavPress (2002). I note that this version does not include verse numbers in the text. A later version does include verse numbers, and is also available from NavPress.

³ See note #2: Peterson's translation apparently tries to make it easier on the reader by distinguishing the three anonymous "friends" in this parable by referring to (our) friend as an "old friend" because having three, nameless friends in the parable is too confusing!

⁴ See note #2: This is again drawing from The Message by Eugene Peterson.

According to Jesus, prayer is about HOW we talk and listen to God. But it's ALSO *how* we talk, listen, and engage one another in life. In other words, this is *practical wisdom* on how to LIVE effectively, which INCLUDES how to PRAY effectively, *Amen*? (There was an audible *Amen* after I quickly explained that's a style I'm used to working in urban, multicultural ministry settings.)

The value of Jesus' wisdom on persistence and directness is that it's practical: It keeps us honest and makes us faithful. Let me explain: Jesus is saying that we're more often to act from self-interest than to go the extra mile to help someone. To put it a different way, we can't always count on acts of benevolence. Disappointing as that may be, we regularly need to challenge and hold each other accountable, and not just folks outside our household but even immediate family members!

Early into my tenure at Samaritan Ministry I coined the term, "rigorous compassion" which I would explain, has two parts: The first part is the easiest for folks to understand and accept, namely that rigorous compassion was "support and encouragement" to someone (anyone, not just Samaritan participants) in need. The second part was more difficult to understand and accept, but potentially more fruitful, namely that "rigorous compassion" includes *personal* challenge and accountability.

This is where we hear Jesus recommend that if you truly need something: Ask, Seek, and Knock – and don't stop asking, seeking, and knocking, until you get the response you need as a faithful follower of Jesus – in your appeals to God in prayer AND in your appeals to other people in a position to help you.

Three years into my tenure as ED at Samaritan I was faced with a significant challenge: It was December 2015 and, despite budgetary progress in my first couple years turning Samaritan around from being underwater financially to being almost on top of the water, it looked like we were going to run a deficit, with just a month left in the Fiscal Year, something the organization couldn't afford in it's underwater state. While I was determined not to let that happen I didn't know what to do.

So I did the only thing I knew: I appealed to God, not for some magical answer but asking, *what could I do* as a faithful servant? I heard something like this in my prayer: "You're good at engaging people: Get on the phone and call all the major and potentially major donors Samaritan has – and tell the truth, use the fact that as the still "new" ED you're trying to turn the organization around – that you believe in the work but you're concerned that the organization isn't going to make it and that you need their help NOW!"

Now, if you know me, you know I'm naturally inclined to be persistent and direct – to ask for what I need. So throughout December 2015 I called donors and did only that – right up to New Year's Eve 2015! Of course, I left more voicemail messages than I had conversations, but I reached over 500 people! Then, we waited. And I'll never forget my Finance Director, Mildred Millen,⁶ walking into my office in early January 2016, asking me, "What did you do?!" I said, "What did I do wrong now?" She said: "David, you did something really right: We've doubled what we previously received in our year-end appeal, and erased the deficit for FY 2015, all because of your calls! So, persistence can literally pay off! Thus began a practice I would continue for the rest of my tenure.

Jesus' wisdom on persistence includes a bold challenge TO US and a bold promise FROM JESUS. He says: "Ask and you'll receive! Seek, and you'll find! Knock and the door will open! Then – as if Jesus thinks he's unclear, he says: "EVERYONE who asks, receives! EVERYONE, who searches, finds! FOR EVERYONE who

⁶ Mildred Millen was one of the best Finance Directors SMGW has ever seen. She served in that role for over a decade until 2016.

knocks, the door will be opened! *Everyone* who asks, and searches, and knocks “gets the goodies” they need? EVERYONE – I mean really? Aren’t there any pre-qualifications?

Apparently only that you authentically *need* what you’re asking, that you’re willing to be persistent and direct, and that you’re willing to play a part in the solution, judging from my experience. But is that enough? I mean, we all have some really BIG needs in our lives, *Amen*?

Actually the BIGGEST NEED / JOB in my life now is no longer Samaritan: It’s co-parenting our two adoptive sons, Jason, age 20, the boy-man that still lives at home; and George, age 16, who’s on the spectrum.

Thankfully, I share this BIGGEST JOB in partnership with my wife, Martha. Our partnership doesn’t make my job easier but it does make it simpler and smaller . . . but STILL it’s the biggest job I and she will ever have!

So, ever since George joined our family at age 6 (ten years ago) making us a complete foursome, we call ourselves “The Wolfpack”. The three others in The Wolfpack couldn’t join me for church here, so I brought a framed photo of them to share (which was displayed on the piano for all in the congregation to see.) When we showed up in court before a DC Superior Court judge to legalize George’s adoption in the District, Martha surprised us with Wolfpack -shirts that said, “The Wolfpack: David, Martha, Jason, and George” on them which we wore proudly to Court. (One sample t-shirt was on display next to the piano hanging on a rack for all to see.)

But one of the most positive life-changing experiences we as the Wolfpack experienced comes from the 4-year relationship that we still have with the Hyde School in Bath, ME, a unique secondary boarding school where we sent JASON during the pandemic, when he was 17. Hyde is known for being an educational entrepreneurial leader in that it offers a rigorous “character-based” curriculum engaging the *whole* student, the student’s *whole* family, for *all* the years your child is enrolled.

Hyde is not a religious school, but it oozes with *practical wisdom* that flows from its inspired work and words which (in the personal opinion of this priest) echo Jesus’ *practical wisdom* of persistence in today’s Gospel. Consider one piece of Hyde’s *wisdom* that is not only central to Hyde’s character curriculum but also critical to *practicing persistence*, namely: “As a student and a parent *prioritize attitude over aptitude!*”

Aptitude is not irrelevant: The point is that if someone has a bad attitude then it’s like building a house on sand. How many times, as parents, workplace supervisors, or employees, have we “settled” for a poor attitude in exchange for good grades, or a poor attitude for a good performance review, knowing deep down that a *poor attitude erodes, if not erases accomplishments*? Yet schools, workplaces, and a broader culture either doesn’t care enough to see a distinction between attitude and aptitude as they accept and require less than our best, our kids’ best or our employees’ best? We can’t be persistent if our attitude stinks. “Fake it till you make it” the saying goes – but you can’t fake that!

So Jesus is also suggesting (preacher’s words): *Persistence is counter-cultural*. It’s easier to be “nice” than persistent. Persistence may make you unpopular, and people may call you “pushy”. Witness some angry folks who were turned off by my cold calls for cash on behalf of Samaritan!) But don’t settle for less from yourself, your kids, or from anyone else for whom you have oversight or responsibility, just because your best is “not required”. And indeed, here’s the big one: Being persistent in pursuit of, or in defense of, The Truth not just make you unpopular – it may get you fired, imprisoned, deported – or killed.

“But know this,” Jesus says, elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel⁷: “Every time someone discredits you or smears your name they’re really going after me. It means that The Truth is too close for comfort, and that person (those people) is (are) uncomfortable. But rejoice when that happens because even though they don’t like it, I do – and you are in good company: my witnesses have always been treated like this.”

Are there limits to persistence? Yes! As best I can understand from Scripture and my own experience the limits basically boil down to dysfunction: When we’re not functioning as ourselves, not acting from faith or principle, when we “Ask, Seek, or Knock” as Jesus suggests. In short summary the four demons that stand in the way of our authentic persistence are anger, fear, guilt, or control. We can NOT parent, manage, lead, teach, or counsel effectively when those demons predominate.

But acting as the healthy Children of God we are, we CAN *practice persistence* in our prayerful appeals to God and to one another in our *life together* in Christ. Where in YOUR life and in the lives of people immediately around you can you “tighten up your game”? Where can you be more authentically persistent and direct? Where can you apply the practical wisdom of persistence that Jesus gives us? Jesus wants to know!

And God’s People said: **AMEN!**

⁷ See note #2, from The Message, p.1864 translated by Eugene Peterson. Luke 6:20-26, from “The Sermon on the Plain.”