

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
July 24, 2016

"PERSISTENCE"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Colossians 2:6-15 ~ Luke 11:1-13

"Teach us to pray," the disciples ask Jesus. But do they realize what they're asking? What is prayer? Is it *"Lobbying in the Divine courts for special favors,"* as Niebuhr put it? Is prayer anything more than just wishful thinking ... dreaming out loud ... imagining the not-yet ... but could-be? Or do our prayers show much *imagination* at all? Mine can be rather pedestrian, not to mention narrowly self-centered.

Does prayer make a difference? Does prayer change things? Does our prayer even change us? Is prayer at the center of our beating hearts ... or a peripheral habit of our upbringing? If you were "raised right" in the South your Mama taught you to pray at bedtime and before meals, and to bow your head and close your eyes when we talked to God in church.

But the Bible says we should "pray without ceasing." Conversing with God should be as comfortable to us as our favorite cotton t-shirt ... but many folks I know feel rather uncomfortable with prayer ... guilty about not praying more ... uncertain about how prayer works or whether it really works at all. Does prayer make us uncomfortable because it connects us with an awesome God ... or because it makes us face the frightening prospect that God might not really be there? Is anybody listening when we pray? Or does God's silence make us feel more alone?

"Teach us to pray," the disciples ask Jesus. They have heard him pray ... seen how much he prays ... how often he prays ... how earnestly he prays. His prayer makes a difference. His prayer changes things. His prayer brings heaven down to earth. He makes it look so easy.

I love to listen when Norma Yaeger gives piano lessons at our church. She usually comes early and before her students arrive I have the privilege of hearing her play by herself ... so smoothly ... so effortlessly ... it seems to me that she is lost in what she is doing. I think, "I can do that!" I took piano lessons for years as a child. So one day after Nan left I snuck into the music room and gave it a try. Must be a different piano! It wasn't so effortless for me. "Teach us to play," I asked the piano. "Spend some time with me," it replied.

"Teach us to pray," the disciples ask Jesus. So he gives them the words. They memorize the words ... just as we have. They recite the words over and over and over ... just as we have. But they are just words. They aren't praying like Jesus prays. They know the words (as they say), but "they ain't got the rhythm and they ain't got the tune."

The words Jesus gives them are true and right and simple. *"Our Father in heaven: your name is holy."* Remember who we're talking to ... close as a hugging parent, distant as the farthest star in the universe ... glorious as the sun ... a bright and burning light ... loving and stern ... inviting and sending ... blessing and admonishing ... offering us life ... but oh-so-dangerous to our way

of life ... all at the same time. Not "my Father," but "our Father" ... not my personal assistant on earth ... but "our Father in heaven." Not a name to be thrown about ... used casually ... attached to just any old whim of the moment ... but a holy name ... not to be taken in vain. From the outset, these words put in us our place.

"Let your dominion come ... let what you want... be what gets done." Do you get that? Not our rule, but God's rule ... not my way, but God's way. As Rabbi Heschel put it, "In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender." But you see what I mean? They are simple concepts to understand ... easy words to say ... but hard, hard, hard to mean ... almost impossible to trust ... to give yourself wholeheartedly, without reservation, without dissembling, without compromise.

"Give us ... all of us ... this day only what we need to live this one day." No more. No less. Are you kidding? I want to ask God for the whole world. Heal all my friends. Make our church big and rich and powerful. Make us your hammer against the gates of hell on earth. And while you're at it, Lord, I'd like a Swiss bank account because I still have student loans from seminary!

"Forgive the ways we've wounded you... in the same way ... to the same degree ... only in as much as we have forgiven those who have wounded us." There are a couple of people in my life with whom I am still so angry, that every once in a while I have a no-holds-barred, tell-'em-off conversation with them ... in my head, of course ... not actually out loud ... because we're not speaking! Some people don't deserve forgiveness, and I can't bring myself to let them off the hook for their crimes against humanity, or their insults and injuries towards me. But if I've hurt anybody along the way ... well ... I didn't mean to.

"And lead us ... not into tests we're likely to fail ... but deliver us from evil." What?! Like we're supposed to trust God for our security in this world? Pray all you want, but strong locks, high walls, and gated communities must be the way to go. If I put my trust in God's protection, then I won't be allowed to wall myself off emotionally and physically from the people who scare me because they are different and maybe dangerous ... the street kids, the homeless, the addicts, people down on their luck, people off their rocker, people from bad backgrounds, the other gender, the other race, the other orientation, the other class, the other political party, the other religion, the "other." We pray all we want for God to protect us, but don't take away our automatic weapons.

You see where I'm going. It's not rocket science. You don't need to be an expert in linguistics to translate what these Jesus words mean. But the nuances ...the implications ... the impact ... the changes it would take to have this kind of radical, humble, unselfish, God-centered faith. Who can pray these words and genuinely mean them?

"Teach us to pray," the disciples ask Jesus, which, of course, is in itself a prayer. You might say it's the starting place of all prayer. I might not yet be able to pray the words Jesus gives us and mean them ... but maybe I can pray that God will help me want to mean them ... move me towards that place where I will be able to mean them. One of the hardest things about prayer in our proud, independent stand-on-your-own-two-feet society is the neediness of prayer. Praying is a frank admission that we lack something ... that we need something ... that we don't stand alone ... that we can't stand alone. A lot of us don't ever want to admit that, not even to ourselves. And it makes us face our indebtedness, our inattentiveness, our absolute lack of any bargaining chips before God.

"Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus answers their prayer with words that show us the goal of our praying ... that we should become the kind of souls who can pray these words authentically. It might seem a hopeless quest, but then Jesus tells us how to get there. Ask ... Seek ... Knock ... Persist. You won't learn to play the piano any other way than by persistent practice. You can read the books. You can listen to the tapes. You can observe the most excellent practitioners of the art. But you will never learn to play like Norma unless you play and play and play.

I have to say, I don't really like the images Jesus uses to tell us that persistence is the key to praying like Jesus prays. They are too easily misunderstood. God as a friend pestered into helping ... what kind of friend is that? Elsewhere, God as a crooked judge badgered into doing the right thing ... what kind of justice is that? But it is an old rabbinic method of teaching ... arguing from the least to the greatest. The logic is that if something is true in the least case, surely it must be true in the greater case.

As Jesus suggests in the other example, if a flawed and fallible human parent gladly gives their children good gifts, surely God will give good gifts to us who are "God's beloved children." Perhaps Jesus could have expanded this point to say that sometimes we ask for scorpions and snakes ... but like a good parent God gives us what we need and not what we want. But the point is that if even a crummy friend and a dishonest judge or for that matter a loving parent will eventually do what is right and generous and just ... surely God, our best friend, the perfect judge, the most loving parent, who is right and generous and just will hear our entreaties and respond.

Perhaps Jesus is holding out a carrot ... appealing to our greed to get us to do what we need ... because persistence has other rewards than getting what we want. If we persist in praying ... we practice until we learn how to pray. If we persist in praying something will change ... the circumstances may change ... or more likely, we will change ... change our perspective ... change our understanding ... change our approach ... change our prayers to conform to God's will.

"Teach us to pray," the disciples ask Jesus. He answers them with words and with encouragement to the persistent practice of prayer. But there's also a more subtle answer to their request. Or maybe "subtle" isn't the right word. You might say it's a nonverbal answer ... an answer that takes years to unfold, as answers to prayer often do. What happens to the disciples as this story continues? Increasingly, they face circumstances which force them to pray ... events which drive them to their knees with desperate pleas or joyful wonder. As they journey with Jesus through that lonesome valley ... ride on the stormy seas and see Jesus walking over the waves ... climb up to the mount of glorious transfiguration ... go down into the valley of human politics and intrigue ... stand at a hill called Calvary ... gaze into an empty tomb ... watch the risen Christ ascend into the heavens from the Mount of Olives ... are set afire by the Spirit at Pentecost ... and journey still with Jesus starting churches, healing the sick, speaking truth to power, and facing their own persecution, and martyrdom ... they learn how to pray all right.

They have to pray. Their prayers become authentic, honest, essential. They pray "God help us!" They pray, "Lord, we don't know where you're going ... how can we know the way?" They pray, "My Lord and my God!" They pray with questions instead of demands. They pray with actions instead of just words. They pray beyond all word and action in an expectant silence, waiting on God. They pray for God to heal their diseases and they pray for God to heal the sick

and twisted social structures oppressing the world. They learn to see God at work everywhere. They learn to be with God in every moment. They learn to speak with God all the time. They go through one adventure after another where they are thrown upon God as their only hope and astounded by God at every turn.

I suppose at the end they wouldn't have traded anything for that wonderful journey. But if they had seen it all at once ... realized what was ahead of them ... the roller coaster ride of following Christ with all the ups and downs and twists and turns corresponding to their prayers ... they might just have paused before they asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Prayer is about the adventure of following Jesus in a world that does not recognize God's rule. Prayer is living by faith because you are doing God's work. And our prayers falter when we disconnect our praying from our discipleship in Christ. We want the green pastures and the still waters ... but the valley of the shadow of death gives us pause. We want "ask whatever you will in my name and God will give it to you," but we want to bend Jesus' will to our wants ... instead of bending our wants to his will. We want the high and holy transcendent mountain top moments of glory, but we don't want the down and dirty deep valley days of discipline and labor and fighting against evil in between.

If you want to pray, follow Jesus. If you don't pray, you won't be able to follow him for long. If you're mad at God, pray. You can't clear up your anger with somebody if you aren't willing to talk it out. If God seems far away, pray. You will never be close to somebody if you aren't on speaking terms. If you are weary with praying about something, keep praying. God always answers prayer, with "yes" or "no," but most often "wait and watch."

If you have any sense at all, pray. Pray the words Jesus taught us until you mean them, because if you're paying attention, you will see they are the only words that makes sense and that all prayers grow out of this one prayer. Pray the words until you mean them because you're sick and tired of the world the way it is ... you're sick and tired of every person for him- or herself ... you're sick and tired of your kingdom and your glory leading you to dead ends. Pray the Lord's Prayer because the world is crazy and this is the only sane solution. Pray it and pray it and pray it until you begin to live it and live it and live it.

Do we have the courage and the faith and the common good sense to say to Jesus this day, "Lord teach us to pray?"

Do we dare pray today? Yes, we dare! Let us pray.

Almighty God, Compassionate Savior, Engaging Spirit:

We confess that we do not know how to pray as we ought. We are always more likely to speak and not listen, to give you a list of what we want from you without asking what you want from us, and to connect our prayers to our plans but not to our journey following Christ. Perhaps we are not yet able to pray the words you taught us and mean all they mean. We pause even to ask you to teach us to pray understanding the extraordinary experiences you might bring us in order to teach us. But we do ask today, that you would lead us to that place in our lives and make of us a church where we will want you to teach us to pray because we know there is no other way, no other salvation, no other hope, and no other name given in heaven or earth by which we must be saved. Amen.