Pentecost 10, FLC (24 Ju 2016)

Luke 11:1-13 “Shameless Prayer”

Grace to you and peace from the our Lord Jesus Christ who teaches us to pray, from the Father to whom he invites us to pray in childlike trust, and from the Holy Spirit who indeed intercedes for us with sighs to deep for words. Amen

A pastor friend of mine who served a congregation in Minneapolis told about one time parking his car on a rather steep hill near his church. His miniature Schnauzer puppy was in the back seat and after cracking all the windows, he got out and locked the door with his usual command to the puppy: “Stay!” “Stay” “STAY”. An older fellow walking by and evidently not seeing the dog said (with a huge grin), “Hey mister, why don’t you just try setting the parking break?”

To an unbeliever, prayer is about the equivalent of yelling at your car expecting it to obey. And even to us, at times, prayer seems like speaking into the canyon only to hear the echo bouncing off the rock walls and nothing more.

Michael Foss in his little book Power Surge lists daily prayer as the “first mark of a disciple” and the ELCA’s Seven Faith Practices includes “pray frequently”. More importantly, of course, Jesus is constant in the practice of prayer, in the invitation of his followers to pray, and in teaching prayer. And more frequently in Luke than any of the Gospel writings!

Pastor’s are expected to be “experts” in prayer if there is such a thing but I assure you many of us are not. I took a ride in the back of an ambulance one time from the Lindberg Terminal to a downtown hospital and the EMT asked me on the way in if he could pray for me and he did! The first time I accompanied a highway patrol officer to tell a family about the tragic death of their child, he led us in prayer telling us “it’s the only thing we can do now.” In these last few weeks when violence and death have surrounded us: Orlando, Baton Rouge, St. Paul, Dallas, Nice, Munich – it has been mayors, police chiefs, politicians & office holders who have called us again and again to pray. .. for victims, families, the injured, understanding, dialogue, peace, and for this madness to cease.

I know very well that First Lutheran is peopled by many saints practiced in prayer and more qualified than myself as teachers of prayer. Thanks be to God those persons and their ministries among us! Anne Lamott writes in Traveling Mercies that our two best prayers are, “help me, help me, help me” and “thank you, thank you, thank you”. We can handle that!

I want to do two things in the remainder: speak briefly a single word in the delightful, humorous story Jesus tells about the bold friend banging at his neighbor’s door in the dark of night.

In an online devotion this week, retired Bishop Peter Rogness wrote that the best definition of prayer he had ever heard was “turning ourselves God-ward”. Prayer is not primarily saying words, thinking thoughts, essay, or petition but our whole being turned towards God. Prayer is rather a stance, an orientation, a way of living in the Presence (capital “P”), living in awareness of the Presence, and even enjoying, celebrating and most of all trusting the Presence. (All spiritual disciplines have one purpose: to get rid of illusions so that we can truly SEE, see what is, see who we are, and see what is happening!) Turning God-ward, we surrender our own authority and need for control. And we trust that God is revealing God’s self in whatever answer to our prayer thought God may or may not be discerned by us.

Now, to Jesus’ story: Since we have the threefold command, “ask, seek, knock” and the man banging at his neighbor’s door – many have assumed this story teaches us to be persistent in prayer. We **are** admonished to persistence in prayer elsewhere in the Scripture but I don’t think it’s the major point here. The Greek word translated “persistence” in the NRSV is found only here in all of the New Testament. Biblical commentators almost unanimously agree that it is an inadequate or poor translation. A better translation is “shameless”. A lexicon reveals that the word means essentially “a lack of sensitivity to what is proper” and can be translated *with insolence, audacity, impudence, or shamelessness.* And who is the shameless, the impudent, the audacious one in the story. Problem is the pronoun “he” is indeterminate; it could be either man. In our culture we assume the door begging door banger but the majority of commentators think it is the awakened neighbor. Because of the middle eastern honor code, he is violating his community obligation to assist his neighbor, to practice hospitality. By not helping he risks sacrificing his reputation.

Our prayers to our loving parent God who is more loving, more faithful, more kind, more merciful than any earthly parent -- ought to be bold, audacious, shameless, unfailingly trusting and confident! So how would we act if our turning God-ward stance were to trust that God would be more generous than any earthly parent? What if rather than praying as if we were putting a message in a bottle, setting it aside and waiting for an answer we would get off our butts and start living into the reality that we are praying for. What if rather than praying for someone who is lonely I’d go visit. What if rather than complaining to those of like mind about violence I’d campaign against the legality of military-grade semi-automatic weapons? What if instead of complaining about police violence I would go tell police officers about my gratefulness for their very dangerous service and protection and dialog about what I perceive to be profiling or unnecessary force?

I know this doesn’t answer questions about unanswered prayer or necessarily ease our pain. But it does invite us to imagine that as we live into the future we pray for we are in fact praying shamelessly. As we work for the rights and dignity of others, as we comfort those in need, as we visit those in prison, as we feed those who are hungry – we are praying shamelessly! And maybe we are being used by God to answer another’s or even our own prayer!

We can be bold, impudent, shameless, audacious because the God who came to us in Jesus understands our hurts and disappointments. Because God in Jesus not only embraced the life we lived but died the death that awaits us all and was raised again to show that death does not have the final word and that all things are possible for God! And so we pray with with child-like confidence and expectation, trusting that if we know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will God give us the embrace of his Holy Spirit, his very life and breath. God is living out God’s life in us!

It doesn’t get any better than that. All is well and all will be well.

Help us, help us, help us, God! Thank you, thank you, thank you God!

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.