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Luke 11: 1-13

Persistence Required

So, Bethel – what a joyful moment this is for me.

My dad reminded me this week of an African proverb which says, “A person is a person because of other persons.”

As you look at me, you see one person, one woman. But that vision is not quite accurate. There are others around me, those who have touched my life and made me who I am, my parents, my grandparents, friends, teachers, professors, and preachers who have spoken God’s word to my heart, and shaped me into the person standing before you.   
  
And as I look out at you, I see quite a crowd, not just each of you here today, but the people who gathered to found Bethel many years ago, the lay people and pastors who have given leadership and shaped the life and faith of this congregation over the years, including your last pastor Kelly and Andy who has served in the interim.   
  
“A person is a person because of other persons.”

So many people have touched and shaped our lives, have made us the people we are. And at least part of the beauty of the church is that it continues to do this in powerful ways as people guide, influence, challenge and form us in the faith.   
  
So, as we begin a new chapter in the life of Bethel UCC, we remember that we are not on our own, or starting with a blank slate. Many have gone before us and are in a very real sense with us today. Now let us enter our new, next chapter with joy!

Will you pray with me?

Holy God – we come before this morning as people on the first steps of a new beginning. We pray you would come among us, stand beside us and lead us forward as we continue the journey together. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all the hearts gathered here be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Well, Bethel – I promise there will come a time when standing up here does not overwhelm me with emotions… this morning is not yet that time.

It is a great joy to be beginning our journey together.

And to be beginning it with this particular text… Jesus teaching his disciples what would eventually become a foundational and formational text of our faith – “The Lord’s Prayer.”

I have to admit, when I realized this was today’s Gospel reading from the lectionary – I had to laugh. I don’t know if you’ve experienced this ever before, but I have a lot – God is really good at calling us out on our stuff…

Church – I’m gonna let you in on a little secret:

I had grand plans for these last six weeks – between finishing my time in Iowa and beginning my time here, with you all.

I was gonna get it ALL together. Pray every day, do some reflective and creative writing, reaa all those books that had gotten stacked up by my bed… who knows – most likely, I was going to finally start meditating for hours on end with all my free time – in short, you all were gonna get the most rested, prepared, spiritually awakened, perfect version of me possible.

Guess how well that worked out?

Life got in the way. Distractions came – big and small – and six weeks passed and all my plans for spiritual perfection came to nothing.

I was feeling a little guilty about that about two weeks ago.

But then, I read this text from the Gospel of Luke. And I read those words of Anne Lamott.

And I laughed. And breathed a big sigh of relief.

Bethel, it’s not about being perfect. It’s never been about having it all together.

It’s not about how long your prayers are, how beautiful the words, how smart you sound, how enlightened you feel…

It’s about simply doing it.

Showing up and praying.

Praying regularly. Praying with whatever words come, or with words that have been handed down to us by the generations.

That’s the first gift of this passage.

Jesus gives us words for the moments when we have no words of our own. When life, when this world, has struck us speechless. Jesus offers us His words.

Simple words. That ground us. That center us. That draw us into relationship with God.

Every week we speak these words as a community.

And in doing so, we are reminded we aren’t alone in our journeys – God walks with us and innumerable saints surround us. I urge you to hold onto these words during your week as well – claim them as your own and let them form and shape your life of faith – even in times, especially in, times of transition, times of turmoil.

That is the first gift of this text. Jesus’ words that become our formational, foundational prayer.

And the second gift? Perhaps the even bigger gift?

I believe it is this: the simple but critical reminder that prayer will take persistence.

At the end of that strange story he tells, Jesus says, of the neighbor who is tucked away peacefully in bed,

“even if he won’t get up because he’s a friend, if you stand your ground, knocking and waking all the neighbors, he’ll finally get up and get you whatever you need.”

In other translations, Jesus says, “because of your persistence” - “because of your brashness” your friend will get up and get you whatever you need.

Persistence.

Brashness.

A willingness to stand your ground and wake up all the neighbors if you have to.

That’s what a life of prayer looks like.

Not perfect words. Not occasional requests when there’s something we really want.

It’s a constant, persistent, practice of life.

This means we’re praying in the car. Praying on our walks. Praying as we show up to work, praying as we drop the kids off, praying as we lay down to sleep.

Praying in the moment it takes us to take one deep breath, in and out.

Prayer is a practice. It’s a way of life.

It’s something that can infuse every day and every moment of our lives if we are intentional about it.

I can promise you that I don’t always follow Jesus’ advice on this one. Prayer often times crops up in my life when I suddenly think of something I need or want.

But the times when it infuses my life? When everything I do becomes a prayer?

Doors began to open. New paths I’m been searching for suddenly find me. I find answers I am looking for.

Not the answers I necessarily want, to be sure. But answers I am looking for.

We know prayer does not promise miracle cures. I’m sure some of you know that all too well.

I don’t think Jesus is promising us that here.

I do think he’s promising us a God who comes awake to our cries. To our pleas. To our joys and our petitions. A God who answers the door to our persistent knocking.

Prayer requires persistence.

It doesn’t require perfection. It doesn’t require having it all together – nor does it require a lifetime already spent in prayer.

That’s the beauty of our God. She desires relationship with Her creation – you could start tomorrow or in ten years and she’ll still come to the door.

Prayer requires persistence.

There may be one thing I know about the world we live in right now.

It’s that we’re gonna need to hold onto our hope and our faith.

And remaining hopeful and faithful is going to require prayer. It’s going to require brash, loud, persistent prayer.

It’s going to require us believing in and trusting in something bigger than ourselves.

Believing in the strength of our communities.

Believing in the potential goodness of humanity.

Believing in the miracle of creation.

And believing in existence of a loving, active God.

A God who wakes up to our persistent knocking and does not abandon us to struggle alone through the long night.

Bethel – we are starting something new today. What we build together is going to require persistence and it’s going to require an active and wide-awake God.

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to be among us – in love and in hope – as we begin walking the road together.

Amen.