

In the church that I attended as a child there was an elder named Happy Lindstrom. I remember Mr. Lindstrom not only because of his unique name “Happy”, but because of the way he prayed in public. I don’t know if he did this in his private prayers, but when he was invited to pray at gatherings, everyone knew to settle back in their chairs, because everyone knew that we’d be praying for a while. You see, Happy considered prayer an opportunity to teach. He would pray through the entire Bible weaving together our petitions and praise with the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, tossing in a little bit from the Psalms, and then rounding it all out with a retelling of the life of Jesus. I’ve never met anyone who prayed quite like Happy Lindstrom.

In this passage from Luke, the disciples express their desire to pray well, and they decide that the best way to do that is to learn to pray like Jesus. So they ask for his help. Jesus offers them an example of a good prayer. You might notice that he uses a truncated or condensed version of what we know as the Lord’s Prayer; the fuller version being found in the Gospel of Matthew. But even this shorter rendition still covers quite a lot of ground.

In using this example Jesus teaches them that prayer ought to honor God so he begins by *recognizing* the Source from which all things emanate. He teaches them that prayer is an act of speaking into existence the beloved community by *articulating our desire and intention* for love to be the universal norm. Prayer, he tells them, is an *expression of our hopes and needs* including the asking for and offering of forgiveness. All of these, Jesus says, are necessary elements of prayer.

After giving this example, he then uses a story to speak to the nature of prayer. And this story, like so many of his parables, is a bit odd. In it, some surprise guests

show up at a person's home in the middle of the night, and that person has nothing to offer them for food. So he goes to his neighbor's house and attempts to wake him (remember it's the middle of the night) which does not make the neighbor so happy. Eventually, the reluctant and sleepy neighbor gives in and provides his friend what he needs to feed his visitors.

Typically this story is described as being about perseverance in prayer, but there is evidence that suggests that that may very well be an incorrect interpretation. First of all, I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that "good" prayer is not necessarily prayer that is done for longer, or done with more intensity, which is what the word "perseverance" seems to imply. Secondly, the translation of the Greek is questionable. There are theologians who argue that a better translation is "shamelessness" rather than "perseverance". The neighbor's *shameless* request that the guy in bed get up, and give him what he needs, is what we are meant to pay attention to. It isn't his persistence that is important; it's the fact that he has no qualms about asking for help even when the need arises in the middle of the night.

Now, there is a reason why the hapless host would shamelessly insist on his neighbor's help, as well as a reason why the sleepy neighbor would ultimately respond favorably. Both the neighbor in need, and the neighbor who responds, are acting out of a deep unabashed commitment to their religious duty to provide hospitality. The harsh climate and often politically dangerous environment that they would have lived in, meant that travelers were extremely vulnerable. Only the force of the custom of hospitality protected them from such danger. When approached by travelers the host was obligated to provide food, water, and shelter and the traveler was expected to accept whatever the host offered. This was, and in many places, still is the cultural expectation, especially within Judaism.

Prayer, here in Luke, is nestled against this deeply felt concept of hospitality. The twist is that it's not human hospitality at play here, but Divine hospitality. God is cast in the role of the generous neighbor and we are the one asking for help. God is the one who is approached with need, and as is expected, responds to us, the traveler, with care and compassion.

We in the Western Hemisphere don't always have the same commitment to hospitality as is true of many Middle Eastern countries, but a small community in Gander, Newfoundland embraced the idea of audacious hospitality with full force on September 11th, 2001. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration made the decision on that day to shut down its airspace, forcing over 4000 planes to land at whichever airport was nearest them. 38 airplanes carrying over 6000 people were forced to make emergency landings in Gander Newfoundland. The town nearly doubled population overnight, leaving the residents of Gander with the complicated decision of how to accommodate thousands of scared, unexpected guests. This small community provided critical hospitality over a tense 5 day period; converting community buildings into shelters, accepting strangers into their homes for showers and a comfortable meal. Talk about Divine hospitality.

One aspect of story that I find especially interesting is how it emphasizes hospitality as more than simply welcoming anyone who happens to visit our home. We likely do that easily for those we know and love; even those who unexpectedly drop in once in a while for a chat. Luke wants hospitality to be understood as something meant for everyone; not just those we expect to have in our homes. Jesus says that "everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened"

Having an established relationship or friendship actually doesn't influence things much at all in the scenario Jesus offers. Notice that when the guy shows up at midnight saying "*Friend*, lend me three loaves of bread" his buddy basically yells back "don't bother me". Some friend. That might have been enough for me to leave. I would have scurried along, embarrassed that I had caused a ruckus so late at night. But in Jesus' story, the one in need knows deep in his psyche; deep in his bones that regardless of who he is, he has every right to ask for help. There are plenty of people who toss out an "Oh God help me" when in distress. And every single human being, when faced with the gut-wrenching realities of life and death, whisper words of hope longing for a particular outcome or situation. Luke makes it very clear that any and all who call upon God will be heard no matter what, but he also suggests that there are some approaches to prayer that can enhance one's connection with God.

We find those suggestions in Jesus' instructions to Ask, Knock and Seek when in prayer. This threefold sequence (Ask, Knock, Seek) reminds me of a book by Thich Nhat Hanh called The Energy of Prayer, in which he suggests that effective prayer requires the energy of faith, compassion, and love. For me these three "energies" are essential to the tasks of Asking, Knocking and Seeking. You can't ask for anything unless you have faith that there is someone to ask. And the door can only be opened with compassion if there's a Knock; you have to make some noise if you want to be let in. And you have to believe that you are loved so much that your seeking love will not only be welcomed, but will be mirrored back to you; love in turn seeking you. Our approach to prayer matters.

Our response to that which is offered to us by God; how we receive the hospitality extended to us by the Source from which all things emanate is equally important.

Jesus asks the disciples “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead? Or instead of an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil,” (that statement needs its own sermon) “know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father/Mother give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!”

What he’s saying to the disciples is that God will always offer good gifts in response to our prayers. The unspoken expectation is that we will willingly receive those gifts even if they are not exactly the ones we had hoped for. What we receive; what we find; what the door opens upon will not always pair up exactly with what we ask for. *Here’s the thing, Jesus is not saying that anything one asks for will be given, but that whatever is given will be good.*

The famous pastor and preacher the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, in his book The Meaning of Prayer, wrote that “The finest gifts cannot be dropped into another’s life like stones in a basket. They must be taken or else they cannot be given... Prayer” says Fosdick “is giving God an opportunity to bestow what [God] is more willing to give than we are to welcome.” For Fosdick our response to Divine hospitality is as much a part of the meaning of prayer as is the act of prayer itself.

Prayer is the act of identifying and giving voice to our deepest selves, and embracing God’s hospitable and generous gifts to us whatever they may be; but especially the quintessential good gift of the Holy Spirit, through whom we find comfort and encouragement in all things and at all times. So let’s practice the art of praying with shameless confidence knowing that God is eager to feed us and shelter us and provide us a spiritual home. Amen.