

Ask for the Kingdom

Luke 11:1-13

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

July 29, 2007

I am finding that the secular calendar and the liturgical calendar are pretty much in sync in these coming weeks. This is not always the case, such as the season of Advent in December, when the liturgical calendar encourages us to be contemplative while the rest of the culture sends us rushing from one holiday event or task to another.

But I am experiencing this present season, the last half of summer, as catch-up time. I have spent a good part of the year a few paces behind. But now I have had a vacation and returned to a schedule that is a bit more relaxed on the church calendar. There is time now to prepare for the busy offering of programs that will begin again in September. Now is a good time to put things in order – to put our personal lives in order, so that we can put our church in order, so that our community and our world might also experience God's order.

The scriptures appointed for these Sundays in the last half of summer resonate with this theme of putting our lives in order. Methodist founder John Wesley did not personally edit our Common Lectionary, but he would tell us that putting our lives in order first of all means setting time for scripture and prayer. Last week Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and our children in Vacation Bible School modeled for us the importance of following Mary's example. We put our lives in order by taking time to study the Word of God.

Today Jesus is teaching us how to pray and in August the scriptures will help us deal with our too cluttered lives. But we need not rush ahead.

Let us consider prayer.

Jesus tells us to shamelessly ask for God's gifts.

It's midnight. We went to bed hours ago, like any civilized family. But now we are startled out of our sleep by someone banging at the door. "What is it? Is there a fire? Are there bandits, or an invading army? What is the emergency which bangs so loudly at our door at midnight?"

What's this! My neighbor is at the door shouting his request for three loaves of bread. Some vagabond acquaintance with ill timing has just arrived at his house - unannounced - and he is not prepared to serve him.

"But neighbor! It is midnight! My children are in bed, if you haven't already awakened them by knocking on my door. I was sound asleep! I am not going to get up now. Make do with what you have. Come back at sunrise."

In telling this story, Jesus points out that even if your friend will not get up and give you the bread because you are his friend, because of your "persistence" he will get up and give you everything you need. Another translation says, "yet he will get up and give you everything you need because you are not ashamed to keep on asking." I like

that translation, and it gives us a good sense of the original Greek. The Greek word that is translated as "persistence" in this passage has the more common meaning of "shamelessness."

"What! Are you still banging on my door? Won't you take no for an answer? How very rude of you. Have you no sense of decency? Aren't you ashamed that you have no bread of your own, and you have to come waking up my family at midnight to get what you need?"

But Jesus tells us to act shamelessly. Be like this man, and ask for the bread you need. Shame keeps us from asking for what we need. God gives us what we need when we overcome our shame - when we are shameless.

We need not be ashamed of being poor. Poverty is the human condition. God is rich and has infused creation with abundance and beauty. We arrive here with our hands empty and all we ever touch is but the bounty of this creation that does not belong to us. And so there is no shame in asking to share in some of the abundance and beauty of creation, because it is God's intention that we share in it. It is not God's intention that we hoard it or abuse it ... but there is no shame in humbly receiving with open hands the gifts of our generous, loving Creator.

God gives gifts as a loving parent, desiring the best for us, ...

God gives us the true treasures of life. God gives us the Kingdom, that is, the blessed community that is God's original intention for all created things. In our pride we refuse God's gift. In our pride we live as though we can do just fine on our own, and we can build our own kingdom. When we admit our need, when we come to God quite shameless about our poverty of spirit and of power, we receive all our soul's desire.

"What parent among you, if your child asks for a fish will instead of a fish give that child a serpent...? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!"

Dad is standing at the sink doing dishes when the three year old walks up behind him. "GIVE ME A DRINK!!!"

"It's not nice to yell like that. If you ask nicely, I will be happy to give you a drink."

To which the child replies matter-of-factly, "But if I don't yell, you don't hear me."

That is a true story. I know. (I was there, standing at the sink.) And I am afraid that the child in that story was speaking the truth. We do not always respond to our children as quickly and lovingly as we should. But we do love them, and we do try to give them the care and attention that they need. We are not perfect parents. God is the perfect parent. God would give to us what we need, and we do not need to shout to get God's attention.

... not like a feared recluse in a high tower ready to pounce on those who wander astray.

When I was in grade school my family attended the Methodist Church in our town. My memories of it are sketchy. We moved when I was 11 years old, and after that

our whole family we became much more active in the church. But I do remember vividly one of the Sundays in my early elementary days. After Sunday school I accompanied a group of my peers on an unauthorized expedition exploring the catacomb like recesses of this old church building. We kept finding back rooms and going up staircases. Finally, as we approached what must have been the ultimate "upper room" in the church's bell tower, one in the group exclaimed that that was where God lived, and we all ran in fright.

I sincerely hope that children don't get that feeling when they come to our church. Let us not send that message or promote that image ... as if hidden away in an upper room somewhere an awesome God sits waiting to pounce on little people who step out of line.

As we listen to Jesus in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, there is no image of a pouncing God. Jesus presents to us the image of the intimate God; God the loving parent who showers gifts upon the children of creation.

Neither is God a heavenly bellhop.

God gives us what we need, what truly quenches the thirst of our soul. God does not give us everything we ask for.

Billy Graham admits that his prayers are not always effective. "Prayer never works for me on the golf course," he says. "This may have something to do with my being a terrible putter."

God is not a kind of heavenly bellhop, a divine concierge, a Fed Ex delivery person rushing around to answer the prayers of the most righteous or eloquent pray-ers, God is not a cosmic Santa, reading his list and checking it twice.

Prayer is not about getting. It is about connecting. Prayer connects us with the loving, giving God.

God is a giver of gifts who, I believe, has already given us our heart's desire. God has already given us in abundance all that we need. In nurturing our life of prayer we become aware of God's gifts. "Search and you will find," says the scripture. It is already there for us, if only we can perceive it. Prayer puts us in tune with God, in communion with God, guiding our search so that we will indeed find what God has given.

"If you ... know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will [God in heaven] give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!"

Prayer is powerful because God is powerful. The power of God is all around us. In prayer we become aware of that power.

God is giving us the kingdom, the blessed community that is God's original intention for all created things. In our life of prayer we begin to see this Blessed Community and to perceive our part in it.

Prayer is not so much a way to receive things we don't have, as it is the way of coming to the realization of what we have been given.

In the words of Mother Teresa: "Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of [God]self."

C. S. Lewis wrote: "When we are praying, the thought will often cross our minds that (if only we knew it) the event is already decided one way or the other. I believe this to be no good reason for ceasing our prayers. The event certainly has been decided -- in a sense it was decided 'before all worlds.' But one of the things that really cause it to happen may be this very prayer that we are now offering." I would add that perhaps it is this prayer that will change us, and perhaps it is the change in us through which God is doing an important work."

So here, at this moment in the middle of our summer season, do you find yourself with a little more time to try something new, or to renew a neglected discipline? It is like planting a tree. The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time to plant a tree is today. Will you join me in taking this opportunity to order our lives with a time of prayer today and each day this week?

Let us pray: God, our loving and gracious parent, we praise your name. There is nothing that we can do on our own Lord, so this day we come to you, asking: we ask for bread; we ask for forgiveness; we ask for your spirit to strengthen us in our times of struggle. We open ourselves to you, expecting that as we receive your Spirit we will be changed. Mold our hearts so that our greatest desire is for the blessed global community that you have promised us. We ask for your kingdom to come, that your will be done on earth, that your righteousness and love be seen and experienced by all your creatures. We humbly give thanks for your generosity and your love. Amen.