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Pentecost 7, 7/29/07
Persistence in Prayer
Genesis 18:20-3, Luke 11:1-13

In this morning's gospel, Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them to pray. Jesus gives them the prayer we call the Our Father, the prayer we still use today in every Eucharist and in most of our services in the prayer book. It is a basic prayer that is known by many Christians, which when they hear it, reminds them of who they are, even if they have been away from church for quite some time. But Jesus does more than teach us a prayer. Jesus is teaching us how to pray.

Remember that rather interesting story that Jesus tells as soon as he finishes the "Our Father" prayer, about a man bothering his friend at midnight to borrow three loaves of bread. Can you imagine what that scenario was like? What would it take to get you out of bed if a friend knocked on your door at midnight? You would probably drag yourself out of bed thinking that it was some kind of emergency only to hear your friend say that he has some guests who have just come into town and he has nothing in the house. Your friend says, "Do you have any bread, turkey slices and some mayonnaise? I would really appreciate it." Chances are you'd say, "Get out of here man. Take them to McDonalds." But if your friend persisted and really begged saying, "Please. It is really late. I just need something to hold them over. I don't want to go out." You would probably give your friend what he'd asked for. And you'd be a little miffed at that friend for the next few weeks at his inconsiderateness. However, your friend would have gotten what he'd asked for.

Jesus says that we are to ask so we can receive. We are to seek so we will find. We are to knock and the door will be opened. We are to be persistent in prayer. And lest we might think that God will become a little irritated with us with our asking and seeking, Jesus is quick to point out that God is above human tendencies. If we humans know how to give good gifts to our children – we wouldn't give a child a scorpion if he asks for an egg, then how much more will our Creator give the Holy Spirit to those who ask God? Persistence can be hard in any situation. It takes work – work over a long time with little return until what you are hoping for comes through. Children, I think, could give us lessons. Have you ever experienced or observed a child in a toy store working on their parents, wearing them down to get what they want?

In our Old Testament Lesson, we see persistence in Abraham who is trying to wear God down into sparing Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham asks God, will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom? Will you still condemn it? And God says no. I will spare it if there are fifty. Then Abraham says what if there are forty five? And God says he will spare Sodom for forty five. Abraham continues - What if there are forty righteous people and yes - God will spare it for forty. Abraham keeps on and asks what if there were thirty, twenty or even ten righteous ones and in the end God agrees to spare Sodom for ten righteous people. Abraham is

good with making a bargain – a little annoying but persistent. He hangs in there with God trying to prevent the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In the story of Abraham, we hear that being persistent with God can yield results. Jesus tells us that we need to be persistent in prayer. We learn that we are to take time in prayer and to ask for what we need. It's easy to throw up a prayer quickly – God please help me get through the day and leave it there. But we also need to ground ourselves in prayer so that we can get through the weeks, the months and the years that follow.

One of the reasons many of us find difficulty in being persistent in prayer is that we don't think being persistent will help. We live for the most part in a "Get it Now" society. If something doesn't work fairly quickly, we move on. If we have a bad lunch at a restaurant, it will be awhile before we come back. If we ask someone for help and they don't come through, we'll try someone else next time. Now there are many places in our lives where we do practice persistence. When we start a program for weight loss, we know persistence is required. It is the same with preparing for a marathon, or pursuing a master's degree. However, all these goals are more concrete, more likely to give incremental returns as we progress to the end goal.

Prayer does not seem to be the same. We are afraid that praying on our knees night after night asking for what we desire will get us nothing. We have a tendency to not be persistent in prayer thinking that it will do no good to continue to pray when nothing seems to be happening. But Jesus asks us to trust. Trust that God is listening and to enter into God's timing. Being persistent in prayer nourishes us. Persistence in prayer brings us into God's presence which renews us and gives us the strength to go on. No matter what the answer is, we are brought into the presence of God. As one author says in his book about prayer, "Prayer is the meat and vegetables for his spirit and this is God's alone to give."

Persistence in prayer happens in the asking and in the listening. When we ask God for something over time, we clarify it in our mind. Being persistent in prayer helps us to truly know our desires. When we ask for something over time, we are given an opportunity to reflect on what we truly want and what we truly need. In prayer, we come closer to what we truly desire. Our initial want may change or be defined over time if we spend some time in meditative prayer with it. Being persistent in prayer helps us hear and understand God's answer because prayer is also about listening. If we pray, "God find me a new job." and then don't take the time to listen, we may miss the guidance that God is sending us. In prayer we need to leave times where we say nothing, where we ask nothing, and where we just wait in the silence waiting for that flash of realization that will guide us.

God is good. God is very good and God loves you. God does not want you to be in a job that you hate. God does not want you to be controlled by the addictions of alcohol and drugs. God does not want you to be hurt by others or be in an abusive situation. God hears your pain. God knows your pain. God hears your prayers. As the author I mentioned before says, "Prayer is ... ordinary words,... offered up to God and

given back as grace. Prayers are ordinary people who give their speech to God and it comes back as comfort. Our prayers give God raw materials to make a miracle and change dark situations into beacons of light; prayer transforms plain, old words into new, holy words. It makes regular people God's people, opens the heavens and brings doves to earth, the presence and power and peace God has promised."ⁱ

In prayer, you see where God is leading you to be your best self, the one empowered by the Holy Spirit that goes out into the world and is a light to the world. This process takes persistent prayer – persistent presence with God. It can be as simple as sitting for 10 to 15 min in a quiet place saying "Help me God" or "What do you want me to do."

Pray for whatever you feel called to pray for that day, repeating the word or words of your simple prayer when your mind drifts to other distractions, leaving your mind open to God's intervention. You can pray using the Prayer Book, where there are prayer forms for Morning, Noonday and Evening prayer as well as devotions for individuals and families. If you need to borrow a prayer book from the pew rack, do so and see what there is. Prayer books cost about \$20 and have a haven of resources. There are many books out there which will help you with prayer.

Prayer is our energy source and prayer is our guide. Like exercise, we have to spend time in prayer to reap the benefits. Can we trust that God is hearing our prayers and that God will respond? Being persistent in prayer is not an easy discipline, but it can be the key to changing our lives. Prayer brings us into relationship with God. We need to ask and be present for God's answer. Finding the answer may take time and careful listening. Trust in God. God is always there. Spend time in prayer. It can change your life

ⁱ Thomas R. Steagald, *Praying for Dear Life*, p. 118, Navpress, 2006.