

# Christ Church Cathedral

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Fredericton, NB  
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*"Persistence in prayer"*

Luke 11:1-13

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## **Luke 11:1-13** [NRSV]

He [Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' <sup>2</sup>He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

<sup>3</sup> Give us each day our daily bread.

<sup>4</sup> And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.  
And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

<sup>5</sup> And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup>for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." <sup>7</sup>And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." <sup>8</sup>I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

<sup>9</sup> 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>10</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>11</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? <sup>12</sup>Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? <sup>13</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

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It isn't as if Jesus' disciples don't know how to pray. They simply want what is typical of a rabbi and his followers, namely, the rabbi provides specific prayers for his 'school.' They know John the Baptist has done this for his followers and they want the same.

In response, Jesus gives the famous prayer which is known as the Lord's Prayer, or, better yet, the "Our Father." It is a prayer for Christ's disciples to pray rather than for him to pray. It can be used as a prayer to be recited as given or as a pattern for our praying.

Here's the pattern:

- it begins with the praise of God and recognition of who he is
- an appeal for his ways to be known here on earth follows
- then comes a petition for our common daily needs such as food
- next is a request for the grace of his forgiveness even as we are involved in the same matter with our fellow human beings,
- finally, there's a prayer for help in resisting temptation, in resisting evil (it's better to understand it this way rather than as a petition to keep us from difficult times.)

Such a well known prayer, and which likely is the best known and most memorized part of scripture, can have many applications. For example, a minister parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a metre. Then he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: "I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses."

When he returned, he found a citation from a police officer along with this note. "I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket, I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation."

Without going into it at all, **persistence** is the point of the midnight discussion about bread. In other words, keep on praying. Just keep at it. To emphasise this, Jesus says,

- "ask, and it will be given to you;
- seek, and you will find;
- knock, and it will be opened to you."

And please understand that these verbs are continuous verbs. One is to **keep on** asking, seeking, knocking.

And these directives come with promises, that,

- "For everyone who asks, receives;
- and he who seeks, finds;
- and to him who knocks, it will be opened."

What one finds is that in the very acts of asking, seeking, and knocking one begins to receive answers, discovery starts and new ways are found. And the more one persists the more this happens. Persistence is necessary.

At this point, it's logical to ask: why the need for persistence, for continuous prayer, for continual asking, seeking and knocking? Is God deaf, is he uninformed, does he not care?

Persistence in prayer is for our sake. We become focused on the One we're speaking to; our attention is on God. God can influence our lives when our focus, our attention is on him. It's like that in human relationships. The more conversation we have with certain individuals the more we let them into our lives.

Praying takes us out of ourselves and opens us up to the ways of God. It helps to purge us of looking only for our *own* answers to our prayers; it helps to free us from restricting our asking, seeking and knocking to our limited and finite expectations. It opens us up to the greater wisdom of God. Our ways are never as good as God's though it is very hard to let go of the notion that surely we know what's best for us since we are talking about ourselves and our interests.

Prayer can be mystifying, frustrating, and hard work.

Yet prayer can so often be most meaningful because it can make us aware of that deep, tangible presence of God.

These extremes can be the bookends of prayer. Our experience of prayer can so often be found within that framework. I sense this dynamic in a friend's e-mail. He writes: "I suppose [you've heard] the gory facts that I have a blastoma 4th grade brain tumour deep in the centre of the brain. Inoperable. I had 30 radiation treatments in April and [in early July] my doctor said that a good deal of the tumour has been narcotized and he is pleased. This is pretty good. [My wife and I] are working hard at prayer and letting God be in charge through it all. So far, so good."

The living reality of our lives and of our praying is in the context of the struggle of our lives, especially in difficult times. Never think that having the struggle means one is a 'bad' Christian or an inadequate disciple of Jesus. Struggles of faith and living are part of the normal Christian life. In fact, I would say that admitting to the struggle speaks of a dynamic, rich and genuine relationship with God. While sometimes we might despair within the struggle because struggling is often exhausting, never despair about your worth before God or about the validity of your faith because of the struggle.

Broadly speaking the purpose of prayer is to become more in tune with God, to know and experience the heartbeat of God, to be "one with God." The more we are "in tune with God" the more open we are to the wisdom of God's giving when we ask, to finding what he wants us to discover, and to go through the door he opens according to his, and our, best timing and according to our real needs. And, amazingly, in that process, our asking can change, our seeking can take a different tack and our knocking can be done with a different attitude. What we "get" as answers often are the changes that take place within us through the process of praying with persistence. And persistence takes waiting.

This is not easy. We want quick answers, especially in these days of e-mail, of Instant Messaging, and we want **our** answers, and we want them **now!** The heart of the

tussle in prayer is between what we want now and waiting on God for his answers in his time. We struggle between independence - but with God doing some nice things for us from time to time - and becoming increasingly "one with God" where we sink every aspect of our lives into the purposes and love of God.

Here is how Oswald Chambers puts it, from August 6 in his My Utmost for His Highest. "The point of prayer is not to get answers from God, but to have perfect and complete oneness with Him. If we pray only because we want answers, we will become irritated and angry with God. We receive an answer every time we pray, but it does not always come in the way we expect, and our spiritual irritation shows our refusal to identify ourselves truly with our Lord in prayer. We are not here to prove that God answers prayer, but to be living trophies of God's grace." A Spanish proverb captures that oneness with God in this way: "If you pray, people can smell God on you." How wonderful it would be if people said about us, as individuals and as a church that we "reek of God"! And how much richer we would be as a result of "reeking of God"!

It's both a challenge and a great opportunity, which sometimes can be very painful, to persist in prayer, to learn to wait on God. That's why he gives us the Holy Spirit. We cannot be attuned to God without him, we don't have power to wait on God without the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Spirit enables us to draw closer to God and, in fact, he helps us to receive what is best for us from our heavenly Father's all-knowing, all-loving, active and ongoing care for us.

I am going to close now with how, in verse form, one person gives expression to this tussle. It's called "*Waiting on the Lord*". The author is unknown.

Desperately, helplessly, longingly, I cried.  
Quietly, patiently, lovingly God replied.  
I pled and I wept for a clue to my fate,  
And the Master so gently said, "Child, you must wait!"  
"Wait?', you say, wait!" my indignant reply.  
"Lord, I need answers, I need to know why!  
Is your hand shortened? Or have you not heard?  
By FAITH I have asked, and am claiming your Word.

"My future and all to which I can relate  
Hangs in the balance, and you tell me to WAIT?  
I'm needing a 'yes,' a go-ahead sign,  
Or even a 'no' to which I can resign.

"And Lord, you promised that if we believe  
We need but to ask, and we shall receive.  
And Lord, I've been asking, and this is my cry:  
I'm weary of asking! I need a reply!"  
Then quietly, softly, I learned of my fate  
As my Master replied once again, "You must wait."  
So, I slumped in my chair, defeated and taut  
And grumbled to God, "So, I'm waiting.... .....for what?"

He seemed then to kneel and His eyes wept with mine,  
And he tenderly said, "I could give you a sign.  
I could shake the heavens, and darken the sun.  
I could raise the dead, and cause mountains to run.  
All you seek, I could give, and pleased you would be.  
You would have what you want – but, you wouldn't know ME.

"You'd not know the depth of my love for each saint;  
You'd not know the power that I give to the faint;  
You'd not learn to see through the clouds of despair;  
You'd not learn to trust just by knowing I'm there;  
You'd not know the joy of resting in me  
When darkness and silence were all you could see.

"You'd never experience that fullness of love  
As the peace of my Spirit descends like a dove;  
You'd know that I give and I save. . .(for a start),  
But you'd not know the depth of the beat of my heart.

"The glow of my comfort late into the night.  
The faith that I give when you walk without sight,  
The depth that's beyond getting just what you asked  
Of an infinite God, who makes what you have LAST.

"You'd never know, should your pain quickly flee,  
What it means that 'My grace is sufficient for thee.'  
Yes, your dreams for your loved ones overnight would come true,  
But, oh, the loss! if I lost what I'm doing in you!  
"So, be silent, my child, and in time you will see  
THAT THE GREATEST OF GIFTS IS TO GET TO KNOW ME.  
And though oft may my answers seem terribly late,  
My wisest of answers is still but to WAIT."