

“The door is open”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
July 28, 2019

Luke 11:1-13

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

One of the best things about marriage is that you get access to the other’s weird, wonderful world. One of the worst things about marriage is that you get access to the other’s weird, wonderful world. For instance, a couple nights ago, I apparently—for the first time in my life—did a little sleep walking. Went for a little jaunt in the middle of the night.

Jenna says to me, “What were you doing last night?” I say, “Sleeping.” You know us husbands—always ready with a helpful answer. She says, “No. What were you doing in the middle of the night, about an hour after we went to bed?” I say, “Sleeping.” She says, “No. I woke up to find you standing over the bed, rummaging through the sheets, ripping off the blankets, like you were looking for something. I asked you what you were doing, and you didn’t answer. You got back in bed, turned to me, and began to laugh.” I’ll pause the story here to add that while walking in my sleep may be new, laughing—unfortunately for Jenna—is not. This is not a little chuckle. I’m talking full, belly laugh. A maniacal, I’m-going-kill-you-now laugh. Back to the story. The laughter, I gather, goes on for about a minute before I turn to Jenna and say, “You thought you could steal it from me!”, after which I roll over and am fast asleep, leaving Jenna baffled and not a little annoyed.

I have no memory of this happening, nor any clue what it was about. It’s a mystery.

Now, Jenna begins her bedtime prayer by saying, “God, please don’t let Patrick sleep walk tonight and accidentally murder me in my sleep.” It remains to be seen whether her prayer will be answered. (You may have noticed that she’s not here!) That also is a mystery, much like prayer itself.

As much as I would enjoy regaling you with other anecdotes of my sleep habits, prayer is our subject today. And indeed it is a mystery. The disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray—a good request, because while some of us may pray often, few of us know what we’re doing.

Somewhere a family links hands across the dinner table and pauses to pray thanks before diving into heaps of food. A child kneels at their bed and sings, “Now I lay me down to sleep...” A driver in New York City traffic shouts, “Serenity now! Serenity now!” In a hospital room, a man lays dying, while his spouse of 40 years grips his hand and begs God to save him. “In a dimly lit corner of St. Anthony’s Church, a woman lights a candle before the image of the Madonna. For a few moments she stands gazing at the image of mother and child, wordlessly aching to understand her distant teenage son” (Martha Moore-Keish). In a detention cell in Texas, a child mutters a prayer in Spanish, wanting to know why—why the cage, why the smell, why the ache in his belly, why no parents. And in congregations everywhere, people whisper, people shout,

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...” All these people praying, and we don’t quite know what it’s for, what we’re doing, who’s listening.

We’re not even sure it works. Back in the 1800s, a group in England wanted to find out and decided to focus their query on the royal family, because surely if prayer worked for anyone, it must be them—the most prayed for people in all of England. Their conclusion: prayer does not work. Why? The royal family is just as messed up as anyone, and all the prayers of England couldn’t help (cf. Edward Markquart).

We might recite our prayers on Sunday morning, or even briefly at the beginning or close of day. But how many of us in our prayers this morning were engaged with every word, our souls lifted in clear light to God—and how many of us were thinking, “Mmmm... I’d like lasagna for dinner tonight.” It’s easy for prayer to feel empty, like our heart isn’t really in it, or like God isn’t really listening. How many of us have prayed for something, only to feel our prayer wasn’t answered? How many of us have said with the Psalmist, “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’ ” (42:1-3)?

I had a different sermon prepared for you today. You might have seen its title in the newsletter: “Keep on knocking.” I was going to tell you to be persistent, defiant, stubborn in your prayer. To pray, even when you don’t understand it. To pray, even when there seems to be no answer. To knock, until the door comes off its hinges.

But I heard a different sermon being preached as I walked the woods this week and stood on the shoreline of Skaneateles Lake, watching the water lap the rocks. I felt in my bones the weariness of a people who have been knocking on that door all their lives. A people who don’t need to be told to keep knocking; they just need to know someone’s home. I prayed, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name...” I read Jesus’ words. I closed my eyes, felt the wind, felt my burdens washed away. Opening my eyes, I saw a small butterfly, resting, on the rocks before me.

A question appeared in my mind: What if all this time we’ve been knocking on an open door?

I looked back at Jesus’ words. He says, “Knock, and the door will be opened for you.” Knock, not twice, not three times, not a thousand, just once, and the door will open.

Jesus isn’t comparing God to the guy who only reluctantly, only when he’s annoyed, gets up and answers his neighbor’s plea. Jesus is contrasting them, saying that if even this guy will open the door, how much more will God, who is good, who is loving. God is the One who is already there at the door before you even knew to knock.

In fact, what if in Jesus’ story we are not at all the stranger on the outside, knocking till our knuckles bleed, but are instead the children already in bed with their parent, already tucked in and safe, already loved and held closely—we just don’t know it? Jesus teaches his disciples to pray to God as Father, as Parent, as Mother. He tells them to pray like they too are the children of God. But the only children in his story aren’t outside; they’re in bed, safe and loved, the door having been opened to them long ago.

It opened because we did not come to this door alone. When Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, to knock, he doesn't say, "My Father in heaven"; he says, "Our Father in heaven." He doesn't say, "Give *me* each day *my* daily bread." No, his prayer is plural, collective: "Give *us* each day *our* daily bread." As if we pray together, as if even before we speak, he already stands beside us at the door.

He's the one who opened the door. He opened it with his prayer, his life, his love. He opened it on the cross, and on the day he rose to life. John Main writes, "The most important thing to remember is that there is only the prayer of Jesus. This is *the* prayer. His prayer is the torrent of love and power flowing continuously between Jesus and the Father, and that is the Spirit."

We are carried by that torrent. In Jesus, God knocks on the door. In the Father, God answers the door. In the Spirit, God carries us inside.

That's all prayer is. It doesn't have to feel or sound a certain way. It doesn't mean we arrive at some perfect serenity—Jesus, though one with God, still struggled, still suffered, just as we will. What it does mean is that we get to listen as God talks to herself: God-in-us talking to God-out-there. It means that we get to let go of the illusion that we are separate, that we're still standing on that doorstep, waiting for answers and love. It means letting go of *our* kingdom—and all the energy it takes to build and defend it—and coming instead into God's, where there is enough for our daily bread, enough for forgiveness and the freedom to live as God's child. It means learning the wisdom of John the Baptist when he said, in reference to Jesus, "I must decrease that he would increase" (John 3:30).

To pray is to take a step, to walk through the door, to trust that it is not locked, because it is not we alone who step through that gap, but God in Christ.

So the next time you pray, don't worry about the words. Imagine a doorknob that you're turning, a door swinging open. Step inside. And look—look for what's waiting for you on the other side. Perhaps you shall wake to find that all along you've been tucked in bed, your Father beside you.
Amen.