

DEMANDING BREAD

Script for Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, July 24, 2016

Ordinary 17 – Higganum Congregational Church, 9:30 a.m.

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Scripture Reading: Luke 11:1-13 (NRSV)

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.” He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” 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; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ 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.’ 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. So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 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!”

One of my more interesting religious experiences in southern California was becoming acquainted with the “God Speaks” billboard campaign. Driving along a freeway—or stuck in traffic on a freeway—I would look up and see a black billboard with white letters bringing a message from God to us freeway drivers and passengers.

Here are two of my favorite billboard messages from God, both having to do with prayer:

“I heard your prayer; I just don’t care who wins the game.

--God”

“If you can’t hear me, maybe you’re not listening.

--God”¹

These examples of billboard theology (which is something akin to bumper sticker theology) provide a helpful contrast with two other kinds of prayer that are quite popular these days.

I think of the first of these two kinds of prayer as the “Santa Claus” prayer: it’s a list of the things (usually material things) that we want for ourselves and that we expect God to give us.

I think of the second of these two kinds of prayer as the “Father Weejeus” prayer, because of how it begins: “Father, weejeus’ ask your blessing on our worship service this morning.”

As the examples of billboard theology remind us, prayer is not about what we want, but about what matters to God; and prayer is just as much listening as it is speaking.

When it comes to prayer (or any other Christian religious practice, such as Bible study, corporate worship, singing, bread for heat, school supplies for needy children), when it comes to prayer, what matters most is Jesus’ teaching and example.

Consider today’s gospel reading. This was not the first time—or the last time—Jesus’ disciples saw him praying. But this time in particular, they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. And in response, Jesus gave them the words of what became known as the Lord’s Prayer.

Earlier in our worship service this morning, we prayed the familiar and beloved words of this prayer. We spoke to God as children might speak to their loving father. We reminded ourselves to respect the holiness of God. We asked for God’s will to be done on earth. We asked for bread. We asked for forgiveness. We asked for protection from temptation. We ended by praising God.

¹ Charles Robb, ed., *God Speaks* (pages not numbered).

These are beautiful words we have from Jesus. These words have been imprinted on us since childhood. They remain with us: even when our speech may be compromised by dementia or by a stroke, we can still say this prayer along with a friend or a pastor who leads us in the beautiful, memorable words of this prayer.

Not only does Jesus in today's reading give his followers words to use when they pray. He also tells a parable that commends an attitude: an attitude of persistence, even the attitude of a toddler who wants a cookie or a teenager who wants to get her driver's license.

An attitude. "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to her at midnight and say to her, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before her.' And she 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.' I tell you, even though she will not get up and give you anything because you are her friend, at least because of your persistence she will get up and give you whatever you need."

Here is an example of persistent prayer that I think speaks to both of our congregations during this time of transition. The story comes from a book by Martha Grace Reese called *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*.

Martha Grace Reese, whose nickname is "Gay," is a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister who consults with mainline Protestant churches about evangelism.

Evangelism is a contested word in today's world. Most of us mainline Protestants are uncomfortable with evangelism. We don't like strangers trying to force their religious beliefs on us. We don't like the idea of trying to force our religious beliefs on someone else.

On the other hand, I think we mainline Protestants are coming to recognize that if we want our congregations to grow, in vitality as well as in numbers, we will need to reimagine what it means to evangelize, to share our faith with others, to witness to the Good News of our reconciliation in Christ.

A number of years ago, Gay Reese consulted with a Disciples congregation she describes as "typically Midwestern, moderate to fairly progressive in theology, with deep biblical roots." The church established an evangelism team of three women, staffed by the church's associate pastor (also a woman). Gay Reese had lunch with these four women, during which they kept asking her what they needed to do as an evangelism ministry team.

She said to them, "Will you all trust me?"

They replied, "Sure, Gay, anything you say."

“Would you spend three months praying together and not do anything else, not make any decision for three whole months?”

To which their astonished reaction was, “WHHHAAAATTT?”

She eventually persuaded them to devote three months to prayer, asking God to show them what they needed to do. “So began an Agony and Ecstasy three months,” she comments.

Long story short, the evangelism ministry team spent three months in persistent prayer, asking God to show them what to do, and their prayers were answered. In the year or so following those three months of prayer, the church experienced a congregation-wide enthusiasm for welcoming visitors, which led to an unexpected upswing in infant dedications, baptisms, membership, vitality.

New England is not like the Midwest. We are the land of steady habits. Even those of you who are not originally from New England soak up this culture of steady habits, the more so the longer you live here. If you're in the habit of going to church on Sunday morning, that's what you'll do. If you're not in the habit of going to church on Sunday morning, that's also what you'll do. Which explains why we don't see many visitors on Sunday mornings. Steady habits in New England, once established, are not easily broken. Our challenge in New England is not to welcome visitors, but ***to invite people to visit in the first place.***

Being myself a New Englander of steady habits, I don't have much wisdom to offer about how to do evangelism in today's post-Christian world. But what I do know is this: the cornerstone for church revitalization is the quality of the relationship between pastor and people. Which is why the ministry of the settled pastor search committee is going to be foundational for the future of our two congregations.

So here's a suggestion and an invitation. If a few of you would like to become a prayer team for three months, starting in September, and you would covenant to participate in persistent prayer for divine guidance and discernment for the settled pastor search committee, who knows what might happen. If you would covenant to participate in persistent prayer for guidance and discernment for our two congregations, who knows what might happen. Remember Jesus' promise: that God will give the Holy Spirit to those who are persistent in praying for this gift.

I will come back to this suggestion and invitation come September. Today I just want to plant the seed, in hopes that it will land on fertile ground.