

One of the tricky bits about being a pastor, is that people expect that you may have special knowledge about God. Perhaps you can explain the way God works or doesn't work. Maybe you are the one who can tell them God's plan and how it seems to be shaping up in their lives, But the truth is that whenever any of us talk about God, there is a wonderful tension between certainty and mystery. Between what we know and what we choose to believe, even though we don't know it for sure.

On the one hand we know God, because God has revealed himself in a variety of ways. We can read and hear the testimony of witnesses throughout the Bible. We can also experience the stories of faithful people in our time. We also, hopefully, have our own stories about how God has been present in our lives.

But even with all we know or think we know; God is a huge mystery. The immensity of all that God is and was and will be, is far too much for us to grasp. When we try to describe all the ways that God acts and functions, we never have enough words. There isn't a box big enough to contain God almighty. And so just like the rest of the church, the things that pastors may think they know about God are far outweighed by the things they don't know. Seminary simply did not answer all the questions that I have about God. Thirty-one years of being a pastor has not answered all the questions that I have about God.

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In the fall of 1988, I had been a pastor for only a short time, and I had to preach on the texts we've heard today. I've forgotten what I said about prayer that day, but I do remember thinking later that day that I had completely missed the point of the story from Genesis. I had taken it only so far and I should have gone further.

God, the all mighty, all powerful, the judge and ruler of the universe had simply had it with the people of Sodom. The Lord had scheduled the demolition of the town and all its inhabitants because they simply would not listen. They were so sinful, that they have gone down in history as being the poster child for sinfulness. They are the standard for what it means to be really disobedient.

Abraham's nephew Lot, his wife and their two girls lived in the city of Sodom and Uncle Abraham didn't want them to be destroyed. And so, although God had announced his intentions to flatten Sodom like a pancake, Abraham started to negotiate. He starts at fifty and works his way down, from fifty to forty-five. And when God agreed to hold back for the sake of ten righteous men, Abraham quits. But here's what I think I learned in 1988. Abraham quit too soon. What if there was only one faithful man in the city of Sodom? Would God have held back his wrath for the sake of that man and his family?

I truly wish that Abraham had asked, because if he'd asked and God had answered, we might have learned a bit more about the power of prayer.

In the end, Lot and his family get out of town in plenty of time, but Mrs. Lot doesn't mind the instructions and looks back and is turned into a lovely pile of salt. But what I want to know is whether or not Abraham changed the mind of God. Is God really so susceptible to compliments and sweet talk? Is dogged persistence all that we need to get God to change the outcome of the story? If I nag at God fervently, will God change the outcome of my story?

When horrid things happen to God's faithful children, were they just not asking the right questions? What kept them from convincing God to go another way? What is it that Noah did or didn't say that could have saved all those people who died in the flood? What is it that we could have done differently and how does the God of Genesis line up with the God that Jesus calls "Abba." If Jesus' Abba - his father or more precisely - his Papa is willing to show us grace upon grace, why didn't the same get done for the people of Sodom? Surely people haven't changed. We are still as sinful as we've ever been. Did God change? It's a mystery and quite frankly, today's gospel doesn't necessarily clarify things.

The disciples wanted Jesus to teach them how to pray. It's a straightforward request. And Jesus gives them a model for prayer that is intimate, profound and succinct. It covers all the bases but forgive me for saying this, but it might not be the most important thing he taught them that day.

In the parable that Jesus told, our translation says that the man was persistent in his request for bread from his neighbor. But the word in Greek, might better be translated as shameless. He was shameless in his request. The man only knocks on his neighbor's door one time. That's not persistence, but to come in the middle of the night, that's shameless. When a neighbor comes around

in the middle of the night asking for bread, that is brazen and bold. In Yiddish you'd say the fellow has chutzpah. "Can you imagine the chutzpah it takes to go to your neighbor in the middle of the night and knock on the door?" It's shameless audaciousness. It's obnoxious and so the man responds.

Who on earth would do such a thing? Have you ever gone to your neighbor in the middle of the night and asked for anything?

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The next bit of the parable is tricky. The neighbor gets up and answers the door. The man gets what he asked for but what does this say about the character of God? If we seek and don't find - if we knock and the door stays closed - if we ask and we don't get the answer to our prayers, are we just not being bold enough? Are we not obnoxious enough? Are we not showing enough chutzpah? Is there something wrong with us? Or with our prayers? Are we getting it wrong?

Lewis Galloway wrote, *this is a bold promise to people who know the pain of unanswered prayer. Unanswered prayer not only calls into question the usefulness of prayer, but also the character of the God to whom we pray.*

English writer Christopher Hitchens, who was a major critic of the modern religion said that prayer is a futile activity, like casting a net in an empty sea hoping to catch fish.

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I've had a lot of conversations this past week about the power of prayer and whether or not God is paying attention. And as it got closer to Sunday morning, I kept hearing an old camp song in my head. *Just seek, and ye shall find. You gotta knock and the door will be opened. Ask and it shall be given, and the love comes a tumblin' down.*

It was annoying. It was that earwig in my head for days. And then it occurred to me that the song had more to say than I had realized. Because we may seek and knock and ask – and simply not get what we hoped for, but the love still comes tumbling down.

Perhaps the lesson to be learned today, is not that shameless persistence gets prayer answered. Perhaps the lesson is that persistent prayer puts us in a position to feel the love of God that comes tumbling down and around us.

Jesus invites us to trust in the promises of God and in the goodness of God. God's goodness far exceeds any good thing that we might do for our children. And the gift that God gives is the gift of the divine self. Ask, knock, seek and what you will receive is the Holy Spirit of God. So, what we find in persistent shameless prayer is not how to best communicate with God, but how to be connected to God. It leads to a deeper relationship with God. A God who wants to give us life and who works endlessly for our redemption.

We bring our needs and hopes to our Abba God because that's what Jesus told us to do. Throughout history there have been wise followers who have tried to describe what prayer is and have done a better job than me.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote, *the function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.*

St. Teresa of Avila said, *for prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God.*

And from Henri Nouwen *Prayer is the most concrete way to make our home in God.*

When we pray, we get the chance to speak and to whisper and to scream and to rail and to complain and to whine and to adore the God who loves us without limit.

And things might change, or they may not.

A loved one may still die. A child may still wander. A friend may still be in pain.

Our own hearts may still be broken, or our minds confused, but we share it with God, who promises to be our companion, our sounding board, our father, our brother, our comforter and friend.

How often have you heard someone say, "I don't want you to fix it for me. I just want you to listen." God may not fix it but God always listens. We are never alone. God is always there. Always listening. Even when we don't have the words to speak. God is listening to our prayers.