

Sermon by Malise de Bree  
Evangelist for Senior Ministry  
Augustana Lutheran Church  
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Luke 11: 5-13

Have you ever heard of E.G. Knock? This is not a joke of “knock, knock” fame or even a takeoff on our gospel lesson this morning of “knock and it will be open”. Rather know that E.G. Knock was the fourth pastor here at Augustana, arriving in 1924 from Wakefield, Nebraska with his wife and 4 children. He had plenty to pray about from the moment he arrived. In fact, the big issue that “met” him upon his arrival was what time the Swedish worship service would be on Sunday morning versus the English one. There was real vying for the most popular time slot..

My recent knowledge about all this comes from reading the golden jubilee album published in honor of Augustana’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1928. Hopefully the peaceful resolution to this passionate issue came after the congregation prayed about it. Certainly in our gospel reading this morning we are reminded of God’s readiness to hear and answer our prayers.

It was customary for a rabbi, as Jesus was, to make his point by comparing a lesser thing with a greater one. Jesus tells the story of the man knocking on his neighbor’s door at midnight to request 3 loaves of bread for his suddenly arrived houseguest. Many of us hardly know our neighbors well enough to ask for the proverbial cup of sugar at a decent time of day. In the typical Galilean village of Jesus’ day, everyone knew each other. The village women baked their daily bread in communal ovens. Then to their two room homes they would go to share their baking with their sizeable families. They ate in one room and slept amidst their animals and children in the other room. For someone to knock persistently at midnight was an outrageous imposition, guaranteed to wake up all of the two and four legged inhabitants of the house. Just to stop the knock and be rid of him, and not because of any love for the neighbor, one gives the neighbor whatever he needs, whatever he wants to send him back into the night’s deep darkness.

This scene is the lesser of what Jesus is talking about. The greater is Jesus guaranteeing us “for everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” No doubt, many of us could share stories from our own prayer lives of asking, searching and knocking. Some of us have joyfully received clear answers to our prayers while others struggle with the mystery of unanswered prayer, or at least prayer not answered as we offered it up. Just because God does not answer prayer, does not mean that He is not listening. Sometimes silence is its own answer.

Even though we may be greeted by silence, we continue to pray because we are passionate about our prayer request; because we are yearning for a relationship with God; because we confess to being dependent upon Him; because we are needy and have “a tangled mass of motives”. As Richard Foster says, we are “altruistic and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. (Yet) God is big enough to receive us with all our

mixture.” Yes, God is big enough to receive us and our prayers. The hard truth is sometimes we are not big enough to receive the answers which come from our praying. Our patience and our faith are tested. We are discouraged and disappointed by unanswered prayer and answers that don’t mirror our original requests. Why does God listen to us and sometimes responds in surprising, startling, silent or strange ways? I can not fathom the mind of God any better than you can. I rejoice when my prayers are answered. I have my faith tested when they are not. While I do not know the mind of God, I do know that the Father of Jesus is a loving, caring God. He has our best interests at heart and often views them differently than I do. Frankly God is much wiser than I am about my best interests, and for this I am very grateful. My prayers are not always in accordance with His will. Perhaps your experience is similar to mine. I pray carefully and passionately for something. God in his infinite wisdom does not give me what I asked for. Instead he gives me something different that in time I realize is better.

Years ago when I lived near Philadelphia, Joan was in a prayer group with me. An accountant by training, Joan was very organized. She kept lists. She had a prayer list. In fact, she had a notebook in which she kept pages and pages of her prayer requests. Joan added to and crossed off her prayer requests as they were answered. She was not trying to hold God accountable. Rather Joan was intent on praising God for answered prayer and dedicated to renewed persistence for unanswered prayer. She called herself a prayer warrior. As the neighbor kept knocking or as a child persists in joining us in our bed at midnight, Joan patiently and faithfully prayed day after day, week after week. She had her prayer corner that she quietly retreated to. Her family respected her desire not to be disturbed and dulled the scattered sounds of TV, the blaring radio and phone conversations. Those were the prevalent sounds in the 70s. Today we can add on several more layers of distraction, noise, and stimulation that emanate from the digital and tech worlds of cell phones, IPODS, computers, and IPADS, to name a few.

William Powers’ in his new book, Hamlet’s Blackberry, argues that as our electronic connectedness grows, we are pulled away from the experiences and relationships that give life meaning and richness.. Not only is this happening within families and amongst friends, but frankly we are diminishing our relationship with God. We put less time and effort into our relationship with God. Instead we choose to do other things. How are we going to spend our time? Are we going to thoughtfully contemplate what we deeply and truly want to ask God for? And then, after asking, are we really going to start search? Search? Search what?...our hearts, our motivations, God’s will for us? Searching requires patience and presence. It demands us to tune in to the reality of God’s world, which frankly is quite different than the digital one. It challenges us to quiet our minds; to let go of the surrounding clutter, noise, and interruptions. As we silence our minds and listen with our hearts, we dare to approach God. We knock with the promise that the door will be opened. This asking, searching, knocking can be as rich, dynamic and enveloping an experience as what we currently are enjoying in our digital or electronic or TV worlds. It may not provide instant gratification or intriguing entertainment, but it binds us to ultimate reality, to why we are here and what life is really about.

God is here now and always, waiting for us to take the initiative of asking and connecting. Yes, he is waiting. Whether we have a pray list or not, may we all pray that we will take that first step of connecting to God. May we persist, just as the midnight neighbor did for his bread, knowing that our Father God listens and gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask! May we hallow His name above all names for being our Father, our provider and our redeemer!