

**SERMON**  
**“Persistent Prayers”**  
**Becky A. Hebert**  
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**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

Job 38: 1-11, 16-18

**Luke 11: 1-13**

He 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?

Here ends the readings from Holy Scripture. Thanks be to God!

## SERMON

Today the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. His instructions include a sample prayer that's a shortened version of the one we are use to praying. Then he links this prayer to a string of parables, giving the impression that these parables are about prayer. And they are about prayer, but more specifically the parables of the friend at midnight, the seeking friend at the door, and the parent who gives the child fish and eggs, are all parables about persistence. Hence, Jesus teaches the way to pray is to pray persistently—the way to pray is to pray relentlessly even in the face of opposition, or especially in the face opposition, to endure in conversation, in relationship with God even when the going gets rough.

The Rev. Tom Long tells about a time that his church in Princeton, New Jersey became concerned about the problem of hunger in Trenton, New Jersey. A number of members from the church had worked in an intra-city ministry there and made the rest of the church aware of the huge problem of hunger in Trenton. The church decided to reach out. Every Sunday, during the service, as the hymn was sung, people were invited to come up and place an offering of money into the plate, all to be used to work for the alleviation of hunger in Trenton. As the Sundays wore on and as they learned more about the problem, the congregation became overwhelmed by the problem of hunger in Trenton. The problem was growing, and the offering could not keep up with the need. Gradually, it dawned on the congregation that they didn't have the resources to solve the problem of hunger in Trenton.

Then came that Sunday when, they were receiving the offering for the hunger in Trenton, an older woman, one of the town's "bag ladies," showed up that morning...with everything that she owned in a shopping bag and dressed in an old hand-me-down coat...came forward when the offering was received for those in need. The congregation watched her shuffle down to the front,

many of them probably thinking that she was going to take something out of the offering plate rather than put something in, knowing that she had nothing to offer. When she got down to the front, the congregation watched. She put nothing in the plate. She did not file past the plate; rather, she folded her hands, knelt before the plate, and prayed.<sup>1</sup>

That, my friends, is persistence prayer!! When you've prayed for years for things to get better, and they only get worse, but you keep on praying...even when it's all you have left to give. It is when you realize, as individuals and as a congregation, that you do not have the resources to solve the problem of hunger, or any other problem, but it doesn't mean that God doesn't.

Look at Job! Here's a man who loses it all and keeps on praying. His prayers eventually were not the nicest, but he does not stop talking to God. He shakes his fist at God and says, "Where are You and why are You allowing this to happen? If You want to kill us off, then at least make it quick. There is no reason to break all our bones one by one unless you just like the sound of it."<sup>2</sup>

Job had it all; a loving wife, ten children, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred pairs of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and even enough servants to look after the whole shooting match. On top of it all, he was a good man who loved God.

His misfortune came about through no fault of his own. No, "Job," says Barbara Brown Taylor, "was quietly minding his business down on earth one day—praying for each of his children by name and making box lunches for the beggars who showed up at his door—when God and the "Satan" got into a conversation about him in heaven."<sup>3</sup> This Satan was not the devil, as we usually think of him. The idea of an evil being operating separately from God did

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Long as quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job*, as quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, "Out of the Whirlwind," p. 165.

not develop in Judaism until a couple of hundred years after Job was written. In Job's time the Satan (I'm saying *the* Satan, because the Hebrew word here is *ha satan*—*ha* being "the") the Satan in Job's time was a perfectly respectable member of God's cabinet, a heavenly being who served as divine prosecutor. His name *ha-satan* could more accurately be translated as "the Accuser". His job description was to bring people to trial when God said to do so. He had no power to do anything without God's approval.

One day when all heavenly beings were hanging out with God, God in passing casually asked the Accuser what he had been up to lately. He said, "Oh, I just returned from walking around on earth." With a big smile on his face God inquired, "Did you see Job while you were there? Now there's one child of mine with whom I'm extremely proud. If there was ever a blameless man, Job's it. He's a good man. He truly loves me."

"Begging your pardon God, but who wouldn't. You've given him everything his heart desires. He's rich, he's healthy, he's happily married, and he got ten wonderful children. Who wouldn't love You. Now if You were to take that all away, he would change his tune. Then he would curse You to Your face.

For whatever reason, be it because God wanted to prove the Satan wrong or God was fearful he was right, God gave the Accuser permission to test Job. He gave him permission to take away everything, but he could not touch Job himself. So Job lost everything. His oxen, his donkeys, and his camels were stolen. His servants were killed trying to protect these animals. The sheep were struck with lightning and the shepherds tending them. His children while eating and drinking at the eldest brother's house had the house fall on top of them when a big wind blew out of the desert. They all died.

In a traditional display of grief, Job shaved his head, tore his robe and lay face down in the dirt, saying, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; God gave and God has taken away.” God was right. Job did not turn from God or curse his name when all that he had was taken from him. “He persisted in his integrity,” the Bible says. (Job 2: 3b)

“Sure,” the Accuser says, ‘but that’s because You did not let me lay a hand on him. All humans will give up everything to save self. Hurt him physically, and he will change his tune. He will then curse You to Your face.’”

God gives permission for this to happen, and the Accuser (the one designated to point his boney finger) made itchy, runny sores appear all over Job’s body—even sores on the soles of his feet. Job silently picks up a piece of broken pottery and scratches himself with it. At this point, Job’s wife says, “Are you going to persist in your integrity? Curse God and die. Put yourself out of your misery!” But Job did not. He responds to his wife with yet another tradition used to orient one to a proper response in situations like this: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad.” Job was one heck of a persistent cuss.

Three of his friends hear of his trouble and go to him. When they saw him they could not even recognize him, he was so terribly disfigured from all the hideous sores. They too lapsed into traditional mourning, tearing their robes and throwing dust into the air. His pain and their pain for him was so great that they even sat with him in silence for a week.

Finally, Job’s frustration erupts, but he does not curse God. He curses the day he was born. Stephen Mitchell’s stormy translation of Job’s prayer flies off the page. “God, curse the day I was born and the night that forced me from the womb,” he writes. ‘Why couldn’t I have

died as they pulled me out of the dark. Why were there knees to hold me, breasts to keep me alive? If only I had strangled or drowned on my way to the bitter light.”

Job pleads to God in prayer for the next thirty-seven chapters while his friends try to tell him he must have done something to deserve all this. Why else would God have done this to him? But Job does not accept their answer as to why God is allowing this to happen to him. Instead he yells (which is not cursing, nor is the use of bad language) at God, “Why? Why is this happening to me? Answer me!”

After, heaven knows for how long, Job persisted in requesting and demanding an answer, God answers. There is no more dramatic moment in Job than that signaled by the words, “then [Yahweh] answered Job out of the whirlwind.” Job both sought and dreaded a confrontation with God, and here it comes. “Who is this whose ignorant words smear my design with darkness? Stand up now like a man; I will question you: please, instruct me. Where were you when I planned the earth? Tell me, if you are so wise. Do you know who took its dimensions, measuring its length with cord? What were its pillars built on? Who laid down its cornerstone, while the morning stars burst out singing and the angels shouted for joy?”<sup>4</sup>

God goes on in this manner for the next four chapters, never actually answering Job’s question. Job’s question is about why God allows bad things to happen to good people. God’s answer is about the mystery of it all, the mystic, the mystical, the spiritual realm where God dwells.

Job has finally moved from the traditional responses to God, from the tearing his cloths and burying his face in dirt, and from that that he thought expressed integrity. He has discovered the inadequacies of the traditional “consolations of religion” articulated by his so called “friends.” Somewhere along this horrendous journey, Job stumbled upon the true meaning of

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, *The Book of Job*.

integrity. This whole story weaves itself around the interplay between integrity as sincere, blunt honesty, and integrity as conformity to religious norms. Integrity is about being true to one's beliefs, but it is also about a level of honesty and sincerity which requires much more than bottled rituals or canned prayers.

Integrity comes from the persistent knocking and searching that leads one into the mystical realm of God: which is what persistent prayer, meditation, contemplation and spiritual development is all about. "According to Job," says Barbara Brown Taylor, "we do not have to be polite about it, either. In the end, God prefers Job's outrage to the piety of Job's friends. When in pain, we are allowed to yell as loudly as we can. 'Why is this happening to me? Answer me! Devout defiance pleases God.'"<sup>5</sup>

What God does not like and never receives from Job is cursing, which I've already said has nothing to do with yelling at God or even using what we moderns refer to as "bad language." To curse God is to denounce God. And never once does it cross Job's mind to say, "You know, with this much cruelty around me, there must not be a God". Or, "Clearly, prayer doesn't work. Why am I sitting here on a dung heap, covered with sores arguing with God, when it is getting me no where?"

When would you, in Job's downward spiral, have stopped honoring God? Stopped speaking to God? Or have you already stopped? Stopped praying that is. What is your prayer life like? Have you somewhere along the line decided, "What difference does it make whether I pray or not? The poor get poorer, the proud prouder, and the hungry continue to starve. Of what benefit is prayer?"

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor, p. 169.

Well, let me let you in on a secret. Come close! Prayer brings God out of hiding with a roar that will lay your ears back against your head as the “morning stars sing together and all the heavenly beings shout for joy.”