

“The Biggest Challenge Is Not Asking”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of
St. Andrew's United Church
(and Joint Service with St. Mark's and with St. Peter's)
for Sunday, July 24th, 2016
Scripture Readings: Psalm 85 (VU #802)
Luke 11:1-13
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

They are the most persistent creatures I know. For me, it was a no brainer when I was asked to speak on stewardship at the 2009 annual meeting of Montreal and Ottawa Conference that this creature would be the symbol for the event. It seems that each year for that particular Conference, they have a theme speaker and a logo to bring together the event itself, and the theme to be shared.

Without hesitation, I offered the theme address title, and the logo I declared clearly should be based on a woodpecker.

Woodpecker? they asked in the organizing committee. Why a woodpecker?

Simply put, woodpeckers are industrious, they are constant in their activity, and they are persistent when they at first do not succeed in their search for insects.

Even to a fault.

I was reminded of that truth last week as I was watering flowers at camp, and I could hear the rattling of a woodpecker tapping against metal. Curious as to the source, I saw this Downy Woodpecker rapping again a frying pan I have hanging from a tree. Undeterred, the woodpecker went away and returned about 20 minutes later to rap again against the frying pan.

This pan hangs on a tree over 30 feet tall, yet somehow the woodpecker found itself rapping against this shiny surface. There was lots of exposed bark to tap for insects hidden below the surface, but the woodpecker went to the only frustrating part of the tree trunk.

Now, for some, this may be a sign that woodpeckers are dumb and foolish, as I have heard a woodpecker rap on the metal roof of the trailer in years gone by, but the truth is this shows their perseverance and unhesitating attitude. Stopped by such obstacles, a woodpecker never gives up. It keeps rapping, and searching, and attempting to make inroads in the tree bark until it successfully finds the ants or grubs being sought below the bark.

Woodpeckers, like beavers, can do a lot of damage. I have a coniferous tree that I made sure could be preserved when installing a new-to-me trailer 11 years ago. The tree had been transplanted by my daughter as a sapling in the 1980's, and I was not about to remove this majestic tree of 15 feet in order to park a trailer. Besides, the tree was perfectly situated to offer shade from the morning sun over the picture window.

The tree now is compromised by the repeated rapping of woodpeckers, and may need to come down within the next couple of years to make sure it does not die and fall on the trailer itself. That also will give room for a recent Balsam growing next to it that will be the new shade tree for that section of the campsite.

Woodpeckers are resilient, determined, and regular in their activity. Come to think of it, when asked about prayer, Jesus said, in so many words to his disciples, “Dare to be a Woodpecker.”

Prayer should be engaged with a clear sense of purpose, a determination to seek what is needed in the world, and done without becoming tired or disinterested.

As you can see from the words of today’s reading, we have stylized the prayer of Jesus in a way that even Luke has not recorded. What is significant for Jesus is that the words are not as important as the commitment behind the words that we use.

In his book on the Lord’s Prayer, Helmut Thielicke, a well-known and respected theologian of the middle 20th century, writes with regard to the entreaty to “Give us this day our daily bread” that the prayer of Jesus does not overlook anything: “great things, small things, spiritual things and material things, inward things and outward things – there is nothing that is not included in this prayer.”

And when it comes to praying for bread, the essence of life is food and water, it is not a search for how many millions of pounds of bread we need for the year ahead for the world, or even how much for the week ahead for our family or community, but the issue is “What do I need for today, to get through the next few hours.”

Modest prayers lead to modest expectations and thus lead to possible solutions.

And Thielicke argues that just as we need to find food every day and prepare for meals on a daily basis, we also need to know that our spiritual needs are a daily journey – we do not get the answers for all time and that is it, but we need to be open to nourishment of a spiritual nature on a daily basis as well.

That was something new in the attitude to prayer that Jesus brought. Simple, practical, physical needs were part of the spiritual journey. Jesus as a trained Jew understood that the wholeness of the person was more than body, or mind, or spirit – it was all of this. A person’s “soul” meant his or her personal identity. The essence of all that one is. Praying and nurturing another go hand in hand.

So it was that the movement of missionary activity in the 18th and 19th century was based on meeting people’s physical and emotional needs as a precursor to seeking to meet and address their spiritual needs. Missionaries found favour with others when they genuinely cared about the well-being of others in all aspects of their lives.

In their book *River of God: an Introduction to World Mission*, Douglas Priest and Stephen Burris point out that whenever Matthew uses the term “compassion,” it begins with taking

care of the immediate needs of individuals or groups. Mission activity needs to be based on that same principle.

In his book on the church in Antioch as a guide to outreach (***The Case for Antioch: A Biblical Model for a Transformational Church***), Jeff Long points out: “The Antioch church gave an offering to feed the hungry, meeting a basic human need...they gave generously to meet human needs. Generous churches care for people in practical ways. They provide food, clothing, and shelter for people in crisis, often people who might seem unlovable.”

The basis for attention to people’s physical needs is not a compromise of the gospel, or a turning back from spiritual concern, it is the very essence of the prayer that asks for the receiving of our “daily bread” each and every day.

Primarily the so-called “Lord’s Prayer” or “Prayer of Jesus” is a “Prayer of the Community,” a reminder that what we need is met cooperatively and with the help of others.

And we are invited to state clearly what our needs are. As Jesus said: “Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened.” Often in life we fail to meet our needs and the needs of others simply because we fail to ask – to be clear about what the need is, and then declare it.

A clear statement of our profession of faith as a United Church is this: “We are not alone; we live in God’s world.” It is always helpful to be reminded of that truth. Once reminded, then we can live by that fact, and be willing and ready to ask for what is needed.