To Be Shameless

A Meditation on Luke 11: 1 – 13

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church August 4, 2019

“Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened. Ask and it shall be given. And the love will come a tumblin’ down.” That was a song we sang many Sunday nights at youth group at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. We also sang “Pass it On,” (“It only takes a spark to get a fire going!”) and “Amazing Grace” to the tune of “House of the Rising Sun.” It was the 70s.

I thought of the “Seek Ye First” song often when I was in college; it summed up the way one of my friend’s lived her life. She prayed about everything, and she especially prayed for parking spaces. This was a college campus, after all. Parking spaces at the nearby Wendy’s were a premium, too, so when she was really hungry, she would pray about that. While she would pray - out loud – for a parking space, I would pray silently that we wouldn’t find one. Just once, God, let her think that you don’t care about these kind of prayers. Just once. But she always got a parking place. Every single time. That Alabama native now lives in NYC and doesn’t need a car. I hope to catch up with her one day, and ask her about those prayers and what she thinks of prayer now.

One of our friends would remind this brilliant woman that she would only take her to Wendy’s if she would order a “chicken sandwich” and not a “chicken sammy.” No baby talk in public. What we didn’t know at the time was this friend had already experienced a lot of the world’s sorrows, in those days of parking lot prayers and baby talk. She hid all that pain behind a beautiful smile. And I wonder how it is that humans are able to compartmentalize and pray simple prayers, expecting them to be answered even when their personal life holds deep pain. Prayers for parking spaces. Even in the midst of much greater suffering. Maybe because those answers are clearer? Quicker? Cleaner? Maybe because we think God can accomplish that, if nothing else.

“Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened. Ask and it shall be given.” This one verse (Luke 11:9) brings equal amounts of pain and joy. This one verse feels like a door slammed in the face for some, and a beautiful welcome mat for others. It’s one of those things we don’t talk about in church: how much doubt this one verse can spark. Depending on where you’ve been, what you’ve known of this life, what you’ve been told about God this verse can echo with a hollow emptiness or resound with a rich affirmation.

Seek and you will find. Except that often times we don’t. We don’t find the peace we are searching for. We don’t find the hope that we desperately need. We don’t find someone who eases our lonliness. We seek and seek and until are eyes are sore and red and swollen.

Knock and the door will be opened. Except that it often seems to stay locked. And not just locked but dead bolted. And even if we could get through those, there is a chain on the door, and a security system waiting to scream its warning. We knock on the doors of career opportunities and no one answers. We knock on the door of a neighbor’s house in need of a hand, but no one’s there. We knock and knock until our knuckles are sore and bleeding.

Ask and it shall be given. Except that we do ask, and sometimes we hear silence. Or we hear “no.” We ask for healing for a loved one, but the healing doesn’t come. We ask for forgiveness from a friend, but they turn away. We ask for strength to resist, but we don’t find it. We yell into the silence and our words drop to the ground.

We don’t talk about these feelings. We don’t talk about how prayer sometimes feels.

So let’s think about prayer in terms of what happened yesterday.

Yesterday morning at a Wal-mart in El Paso, Texas, our nation experienced its 250th mass shooting. A few hours later in Dayton, Ohio, on a typically friendly street, another mass shooting took place. Number 251.  [*Gun Violence Archive*](https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/)*, a not-for-profit organization that provides online public access to information about gun-related violence categorizes mass shootings as incidents in which four or more people were shot or killed, not including the shooters.*

Yesterday was the 215th day of 2019. Two hundred and fifteen days. Two hundred and fifty one mass shootings. We don’t need to do the math. The majority of these don’t receive much attention. Drive-by shootings, domestic situations, gang violence. If we cared as much about these incidents, might we have already done something about gun proliferation? But for the biggies – the schools, the entertainment venues, the shopping malls - the media will be obsessed with the details. And, as always we will hear the words “thoughts and prayers.” Sometimes we will hear that said with sincere compassion, “our thoughts and prayers are with you” and other times it will be said with anger, “we don’t want any more of your thoughts and prayers.”

I turned on CNN yesterday at a moment when the reporters were interviewing a representative of an organization providing free burials for all victims. They were partnering with funeral homes on both sides of the border so that no family would have to bear this additional burden. And though it shouldn’t be this way, God is present in this act of compassion. God embodied. A mother of three died in El Paso. She sheltered her baby with her body, and though the infant sustained some broken bones, she saved his life. And God is tragically present in that sacrifice. God is enfleshed in that mother’s love. Community members lined up to give blood for the victims. God incarnate in this gift of life. These are the responses to the prayers, to the seeking, the knocking, the asking. People are living out the answers to the cries of their neighbors. God depends upon us to be the answers to the prayers that are pouring into heaven.

And this weekend, in Washington D.C., two of our members, Judy Taylor and Gillie Presley, have joined with people from around the country as Moms Demand Action gathered to work for change. They are a visible answer to prayer as they work for sensible gun legislation; they are part of the answer to the ongoing prayer for safety, peace and hope.

In this section of Luke’s gospel, Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray – at their request. He then tells a story about prayer, a parable, and an example of the extravagance of God’s love. In the parable a resident wakes his neighbor because he is in need of food for his guest. In the middle of the night, he shamelessly bangs on his neighbor’s door. Many translations have led us to believe that it is persistence that gets him what he needs, but it is actually brashness, boldness, shamelessness.

As much as we possibly can, we are to live out the answers to the prayers of God’s people. Not only are we to feed and to clothe and to visit, to befriend and to welcome, but fearlessly and boldly we are to work for the change God longs to see in this world. We who have been blessed with abundance, must share. We who have been blessed with education, must teach. We who have been blessed to know peace, must demonstrate peace. We who are safe from prejudice and racism, must be willing to take risks for those who are not safe. And all of us, all of us who have a voice, must lift it up to shamelessly lobby for change. Our children are dying. Our mothers and fathers are dying. Our neighbors are dying. We must be brash. And though there is no one profile that fits all these shooters, we have heard time and time again, stories of exclusion, of bullying, of indoctrination into lives fueled by hatred of the other.

Which means me must start right here in our own house. We must open our hearts and ask God to shine light in the corners where hatred can hide. We must ask God to open our eyes to our biases, for we all have them. If we are to be peacemakers in the world, we must begin by finding peace within our souls and we must nurture that peace in our community. Let us pray that when people come here, they will feel God’s compassion. Warmth. Welcome. Acceptance. Not syrupy and sweet, but strong and shameless.

We cannot wait. We must labor unashamedly for peace if we do not want people to lose hope. Those who suffer from acts of violence must know that when they seek safety, they will find it; that when they knock, the door to refuge will be answered; that when they ask for life, it will be given.

God needs us to be the embodiment of the answer to the prayers of a hurting world.

Listen again to verse 13: “If you 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?” The gift of the Holy Spirit. That is the promise God has made. Let us not waste our breath praying for parking spaces or sunny days. God already knows we like those things. Let us pray for the continual outpouring of God’s Spirit upon our souls. Let us pray that God’s disruptive wind will continually unsettle us so that we. Ike those first disciples might find ourselves rushing out into the streets to speak in language bold and fresh, the words of peace that our world so desperately needs to hear.

Thanks be to God, in whom our peace is found. Amen.

Blessing in a Time of Violence

Which is to say

this blessing

is always.

Which is to say

there is no place

this blessing

does not long

to cry out

in lament,

to weep its words

in sorrow,

to scream its lines

in sacred rage.

Which is to say

there is no day

this blessing ceases

to whisper

into the ear

of the dying,

the despairing,

the terrified.

Which is to say

there is no moment

this blessing refuses

to sing itself

into the heart

of the hated

and the hateful,

the victim

and the victimizer,

with every last

ounce of hope

it has.

Which is to say

there is none

that can stop it,

none that can

halt its course,

none that will

still its cadence,

none that will

delay its rising,

none that can keep it

from springing forth

from the mouths of us

who hope,

from the hands of us

who act,

from the hearts of us

who love,

from the feet of us

who will not cease

our stubborn, aching

marching, marching

until this blessing

has spoken

its final word,

until this blessing

has breathed

its benediction

in every place,

in every tongue:

Peace.

Peace.

Peace.

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