

Annoying God

A Sermon on Luke 11: 5-13 by Rich Holmes

Delivered on October 4, 2020

“Suppose one of you has a friend,” Jesus tells us “and he goes to him at midnight and says ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’ Then the one inside answers ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s persistence, he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So, I say to you, ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”

I am calling today’s sermon “Annoying God.” I guess I should be calling it “Annoying God When You Pray” because that’s what it’s really about, but I knew “Annoying God” would be a provocative title and that was my intent. Maybe you like this story that Jesus tells about the friend persistently knocking on the door because you have always seen some value in praying for the same thing over and over again. But you don’t think it is possible to annoy God, and let’s face it, you’re even annoyed by the suggestion that you could annoy God. But why would you say that? Now, I have to admit that I’m inclined to say that. I wouldn’t normally think of God as being capable of being annoyed, either, but not for the reason you might think. It isn’t because I never think of God as having negative emotions like anger or sadness. But I suppose the reason is that while I think God is angered by events like child abuse and injustice, and while I think God is saddened by the suffering of the sick and the poor and the lonely, it would be strange to say that God is annoyed by these things. These things seem far too important for God to be annoyed about. And in the same way anyone who told you “I am annoyed by child abuse” or “I

am annoyed by the COVID pandemic" would seem to be someone who isn't sufficiently emotional about these things.

It isn't that God can't have negative emotions, but when you think about things we get annoyed about, they mostly seem to be small things, things like buzzing houseflies and barking dogs, traffic jams on the way to work, things that simply seem much too small for the God of the universe to be concerned about.

But as I was writing this sermon, here's the thing that occurred to me about being annoyed. We discover from an early age that annoyance is a great motivator. Even children discover that if they annoy their parents by asking them for something over and over and over again, they can usually get them to respond, just to get them to stop asking about it. And when we are older we discover that if you want that city official to repaint the lines on the road or to replace that broken stoplight you keep calling and calling and calling city hall until they finally do it just to get you to stop calling. Annoyance is a great motivator because nobody likes to be annoyed. You may tell me that nobody likes having any negative emotion, but that isn't true. Sometimes people like to be sad. They want to watch sad movies, or hear sad songs. As Sir Elton John says, "Sad songs say so much." But he never said "Annoying songs say so much." Nobody wants to watch an annoying movie or hear an annoying song.

Can we really annoy God? Well, I just don't know. But rather than asking ourselves what kind of emotions God is capable of having, maybe we should instead ask ourselves what Jesus was trying to tell us by telling us this story. If we are to wonder about why Jesus tells us this story, then surely it will occur to us that among Jesus' disciples must have been some people who said "There's no sense in praying to God about the same thing over and over again. For

surely God is not senile or forgetful and so there is no need to repeat ourselves about something we've already told God once," they must have said to themselves. Maybe they even said "There's no need to pray to God at all. If God knows everything, then God already knows everything that we want, so what's the point of asking God for anything?" And so they simply stopped praying. And as they stopped praying, soon enough they would forget that they ever cared about the things they would once pray about. They would forget that they ever cared about sickness, they would forget they ever cared about hunger. They would forget that they ever cared about that child who has lost both her mom and her dad and who wonders around the streets looking for love with those hopeless eyes. They would forget that they ever cared about that poor widow who can't even have the comfort of having her dignity in her old age, but day after day has to wonder the streets begging for food. When you stop praying about these things, you forget they matter. When you stop praying about these things, you find an empty hole in your chest where your heart used to be.

And so Jesus says "Don't ever let that happen. Don't ever stop praying for the things that we need in this life any more than you would ever stop banging on that friend's door at midnight. Don't ever stop praying any more than a small child would stop asking his parents for the same thing over and over and over again."

Praying over and over again for the same things is something that you notice we do here at Northminster. We pray for people in our community who are sick over and over again. We pray for peace even though on any given day there is war somewhere in this world. We pray for human rights to be recognized in despotic regimes like North Korea, even though we have prayed for that a thousand times before. Didn't God hear us the first thousand times we prayed

for these things? Yes, but that's the wrong question to ask. The right question to ask is "What happens to us when we stop praying for these things?"

I once heard a story about a very conservative town that had a very conservative church, where you would frequently hear sermons that condemned the so-called sins of drinking alcohol and dancing and wearing make-up and all that stuff. And this conservative town was also a dry town, meaning of course that it was a town in which the sale of alcohol was prohibited, until one day the people of the town voted to change the law and allow for the sale of alcohol. Well, the pastor at the church lamented this change in the law as the devil's work, but for a while everything was business as usual and nothing in the town changed. One day though, there was a man who came to town who opened up a liquor store right across the street from the church. Well, the pastor didn't like this very much and so he started calling for Wednesday night prayer meetings to pray that God would shut down the liquor store.

Well, these meetings went on for a few months, but the liquor store didn't shut down, in fact, it was more popular than ever, and on these Wednesday nights there were always more people across the street in the liquor store than there were at the prayer meetings. Well, this really irritated the pastor, and so the prayer meetings started getting longer and longer, and finally the liquor store became so popular, that there was no space left in the liquor store parking lot, and people started parking in the church's parking lot and walking across the street to the liquor store. Well, when that happened, the pastor finally had enough. He sent out a letter by certified mail to every member of the church that said "We are having a prayer meeting next Wednesday night and if you are a member of this church, your attendance is mandatory." So everyone came to the prayer meeting the following Wednesday night, and

wouldn't you know that it worked. That night while everyone in town slept there was a violent thunderstorm. A bolt of lightning hit the liquor store and a fire broke out. And as the fire was fueled by all the alcohol inside the store, believe it or not, the store burned clear to the ground.

Well, the proprietor of the liquor store was of course very angry about this, and he decided that he was going to sue the church for causing his store to burn to the ground. He hired an attorney who got up in court and said to the judge, "Your honor, this church had a well-attended prayer meeting in which they prayed that God would destroy my client's store, and that very night God answered their prayer by sending a lighting bolt to burn my client's store to the ground, so this church is responsible for destroying my client's store." But you see, the church had hired their own attorney and their attorney got up and said that the church was not responsible for destroying this man's store. It was just a coincidence that they prayed and that later that evening a lighting bolt hit the store.

Well, as you probably already guessed, the judge ruled in the church's favor, but it may be the one time in all of history in which someone has won their case in court but found themselves wishing that they had lost. For you see, when the judge issued his ruling in the church's favor, he said "I find myself in the odd position of being persuaded not by the proprietor of a liquor store who believes in the power of prayer, but by a church of Christians who do not."

Ironic, isn't it? Ironic, but not the least bit surprising. Why didn't this church believe in the power of prayer? You know why. We all do. It is because they had been so used to God not answering their prayers that when God finally did answer, they no longer saw it as an answer. The owner of the liquor store, on the other hand, wasn't someone who prayed, and so he never

had any reason to doubt the power of prayer. It is easy to lose heart and give up on your prayers when you never see them being answered. But when you stop praying that is exactly what you do, you lose your heart.

We pray for the same things over and over again in this church. Whether God answers us because we annoy God or whether or not it is even possible to annoy God I do not know. But I believe that we should continue to pray for the same things over and over again even though I also believe that God heard us the first time. For when we stop praying, the things we stop praying about also stop mattering.