

B PENT 21 10-14-2018
Listening Skills
Luke 22:39-46 Philippians 4:4-8 Luke 11:1-13

Half way through seminary I felt led to follow a couple I had met there to Mt. Pleasant, MI to work in a campus ministry they were starting. Since we were to move there in the fall, I had the summer to earn enough money to move us. The only job I could find that had any chance of supplying enough funds was selling encyclopedias door-to-door. The guy who taught me how to do this had made \$85,000 the previous year selling door-to-door. To put that in perspective, \$85,000 in 1975 is the equivalent of nearly \$400,000 today. What I discovered was that it took about 300 doors before I could sell a single set of cycs! I didn't approach his success, but I did tie a company record for the most sets sold without a single cancellation, 14. If you are doing the math, that is approximately 4,200 doors in less than 10 weeks. Persistence paid off. But it wasn't only about persistence. Another member of our team sold 21 sets of books during the same period and all 21 families cancelled their order within 3 days. Did I mention we worked on commission? What I discovered, and it was something they didn't teach me, was that, even more important than telling my customers about my product, was listening to their hopes and dreams for their children. It didn't hurt that I was a true believer in what I was doing. In my house growing up, we had a set of the Encyclopedia Americana, World Book, the Book of Knowledge (a science-based encyclopedia) and the Great Books collection (which I still own). It was expected that when we gave our sales pitch, we would be with a family for 40 minutes. This probably won't shock you all, but my average was closer to 2 hours. On the other hand, my record speaks for itself. I could count on both hands the number of times I gave my spiel without selling a set of books.

Now you may be correct in thinking that making an analogy between praying and selling encyclopedias is a bit crass. On the other hand, they do have some similarities, the first being perseverance. Paul tells us in I Thessalonians 5:16-18 to, "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." How can anyone "pray without ceasing" anymore than one can "rejoice always" or "give thanks in everything"? That question gets to second thing I learned by selling cycs, listening is even more important than telling. Prayer is about communion with God. God wants that communion to be a continuous, running dialogue between us and the Almighty, and with God doing most of the talking.

Tell me, when do you pray? Is it only in time of trial or when there is something you desperately want? If that is the case, then I could argue that you have never really prayed at all. You are like that poor, luckless, encyclopedia salesman who went a whole summer knocking on doors without a single dime to show for it. Last week we heard Saint James admonish us that, "You do not receive because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." James 4:2b-3. Remember the Lord's Prayer? "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Whose will are we praying to be done? Ours? No, God's! And how exactly do we know what is God's will in any given situation? Remember Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane? "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

If you want your prayers to be answered, then pray in God's will, and the way we know God's will is to listen and the way we listen is to practice the presence of God. Dr. Elaine A. Heath, the author of Five Means of Grace: Experience God's Love the Wesleyan Way, shares an expression that captures what it means to practice the presence of God. It was a concept that was taught to her by her spiritual mentor who taught her, "When you guide new Christians in following Jesus, don't start with doctrine. If you do, you will ruin them. Instead, start with prayer. Teach them to gaze into the face of Jesus, who gazes back with infinite love."

I had a parishioner who had endured a great deal of suffering in his life. He had many struggles, but he taught me a valuable practice. He told me that whenever he encountered someone for whom he didn't know how to pray, he envisioned him or her standing in the presence of the light of Christ. He called this practice holding them up to the light. What a wonderful way to offer intercessory prayer for others for whom we are at a loss about how to pray. But this practice has another application perhaps even more important and that is holding ourselves up to the light of Christ, to envision ourselves standing or kneeling in his presence and gazing into the face of him who gazes back at us with infinite love.

Jesus' parable in our gospel lesson today about the person who goes to a friend at midnight seeking bread to share with a guest who has arrived, teaches us both about perseverance and the nature of God. In verse 8, the Revised Standard Version translates this way, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his *importunity* he will rise and give him whatever he needs." Importunity is a strange word. It is the quality of being persistent in soliciting someone to the point of being obnoxious or annoying. Those pesky telephone marketers have the quality of importunity. The Greek word thus translated appears only here in the New Testament. The New International Version translates the verse this way, "⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your *shameless audacity* he will surely get up and give you as much as you need." Your shameless audacity! There is a certain ambiguity in the Greek and the NIV has taken liberties with the pronouns, changing a 3rd person he to a 2nd person you, in order to avoid it. You see, this rather rare word that the RSV translates "importunity" and the NIV translates "shameless audacity", literally means "shamelessness" and it is not certain from the grammar whether this "shamelessness" refers to the person making the request or the one of whom the request is being made.

There exists in the Middle East to this day a culture in which there are three driving forces, community good takes precedence over the individual's, the necessity of showing hospitality and the avoidance of shame. These are as foreign to us in the West today as they were to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Bottom line is that the man asleep in his house, even if he weren't willing to rise and help out of friendship would not hesitate to do so because of his anaideian **A-NY'-day-AN'**, his shamelessness, his aversion to shame. How does the Lord's Prayer begin? Our Father, who art in heaven, **HALLOWED BE THY NAME!** We can be confident in our prayers because God will not allow his name to be shamed. If we who are evil know how to give our children good things, how will our heavenly Parent not give us everything we need and the Holy Spirit?

We are like Adam and Eve in the garden after they had sinned, reluctant and fearful of coming into the presence of God, but we needn't be! It was for this very reason that Jesus came and died for us, so that once again we could approach our Creator with love and gratitude rather than fear and dread. And the promise to us is an even closer relationship with God than our progenitorial ancestors had; one in which the Spirit of God comes and dwells in us. Can you imagine an existence filled with more joy, more peace and more love than that? But God will not force it upon us. It is up to us ask; up to us to seek; up to us to knock. And the assurance we have from God is that everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, it will be opened.

Practicing God's presence is prayer. In fact, all of the other 4 means of grace that we will explore are forms of prayer. But before we can soar we must first crawl. Begin with a daily prayer time, better yet begin and end each day with prayer. I suggest you begin with this morning's centering prayer, by Howard Thurman:

O Holy God,
 open unto me
 light for my darkness,
 courage for my fear,
 hope for my despair.

O loving God,
 open unto me
 wisdom for my confusion,
 forgiveness for my sins,
 love for my hate.

O God of peace,
 open unto me
 peace for my turmoil,
 joy for my sorrow,
 strength for my weakness.

O generous God,
 open my heart
 to receive all your gifts.
 Amen.

BENEDICTION

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. Amen.