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Saint George's Episcopal Church, Arlington, Virginia
Luke 11: 1-13
Pentecost X, July 24th, 2016

"Knocking on God's Door"

When we were living in Southern California almost 20 years ago, we went on a weekend camping trip with several other families from our church. When we left sunny Coronado it was about 70 perfect degrees as usual, and when we got into the mountains about 2 hours away, it was about 20 degrees cooler. This was our big adventure that we had been planning for a while and our son, who was about 10 at the time, was really excited. All of the kids in the group had been looking forward to it for a long time and were especially glad to be sleeping in their own tent on the far side of the camping site away from their parents. We had a fun first night making dinner together, having s'mores by the campfire and telling

stories. And around midnight, after we had all settled into a nice deep sleep, the tent of 10-year-old boys started yelling for help. Robbie and I kind of half way woke up and just thought they were fooling around. They didn't sound terribly desperate. And we were really tired, so we just yelled out for them to go to sleep. Well, in the morning we discovered that one of the "GOOD" parents had gotten up and come to their rescue. The top of their tent had caved in and they really did need help getting it back up. We felt pretty bad.

The father in today's parable has a similar response at first. He is all settled down for a long winter's nap and his friend knocks on the door asking for bread because an unexpected visitor has arrived at his house and he doesn't have any food to offer him. The father doesn't want to get out of bed, but unlike

myself, he finally does get up and helps his friend because his friend won't take no for an answer.

Jesus tells this parable immediately after teaching his disciples what we now know as the Lord's Prayer. We say this prayer together week after week, Sunday after Sunday. It has been absolutely central and foundational to worship since the very earliest days of Christianity. And yet we often miss the urgent, pleading tone of it, especially in Luke's version. The prayer also appears in Matthew, but Luke's is shorter and simpler.

Father, hallowed be your name. "God you are holy, you are perfect." Your kingdom come. "Make this world more like heaven."

Give us each day our daily bread. "Give us what we need.

Help us because we can't help ourselves. We need bread. We need forgiveness. We need help forgiving other people and we need help in trying, stressful times."

When we ask for what we need, we are asking a God who is like a loving parent, a far more generous and compassionate parent than even the very best parent. And even when our prayers don't seem to be getting answered, we are supposed to be persistent. God expects us to be pushy, to never give up, to search and knock and ask, over and over and over again. Oftentimes we don't even know what we need, we don't know the answer to our personal woes or our public woes, but we do know we need help. Sometimes reaching rock bottom is right where we need to be. "God, I am utterly

and completely at a loss and I'm not going to stop knocking on your door until you show me the way. I can't help myself. I need the help that only you can give." That's when we know we are making progress. When we get to that place. And sometimes we have to wait at that door a long time. But it will open and God will respond. We will be given what we need but we won't necessarily be given what we thought we needed. We often want problems to magically disappear, but we come to realize as we grow in the spiritual life that things don't work that way- because if they did, we would never mature. Recognizing our limits and God's power to help us is the beginning of wisdom.

The 12-step program of AA has helped millions of people in this place. Step 1 is for the alcoholic to admit that they are

powerless over alcohol and step 2 is to come to believe that a Power greater than themselves can restore them to sanity.

When we apply this thinking more broadly, Step 1 for all of us is to admit that we are powerless over _____. It may be a problem with a relationship where we have tried and tried and nothing has changed. It may be a problem with an unhealthy way of thinking. Whatever it may be, recognizing that we can't control x, y or z is the first step. And step #2 is to realize that because we are at rock bottom and don't know what to do, we need to ask God to help us. And hearkening back to the parable, we knock and plead and beg, until God answers. And God will answer. It's just a matter of waiting and looking for it- in whatever form it may come. And the funny thing is, after we've gone through this process, we are often given the gift of a new perspective about how we can do something

about our situation. It's in admitting our powerlessness that we find power. God sends someone to us to help us or we are given a new insight or we find a reserve of courage that we didn't know we had. Persistence in prayer really does pay off. And the journey to get the answer we are asking for is often as valuable as the answer itself. The gift is in the asking.

Many spiritual giants in Christianity went for years and years, knocking and searching and pleading, not even sure if God was listening. But they refused to give up. It was their dogged persistence that distinguished them. 10% belief and 90% determination.

The world was shocked to learn after her death about 10 years ago that Mother Theresa struggled with tremendous doubt

much of her adult life. As a young adult, she had enjoyed a profound sense of God's presence and a joyful prayer life, but as time went on and she experienced the horrible reality of the people she was ministering to- the poorest of the poor in Calcutta-she became plagued by doubt and darkness. Saint John of the Cross called this sense of abandonment by God the "dark night of the soul". It can happen to anyone, even the most ardent believer.

James Martin, a Jesuit priest and best-selling author says this.

"In time, with the aid of the priest who acted as her spiritual director, Mother Teresa concluded that these painful experiences could help her identify not only with the abandonment that Jesus Christ felt during the crucifixion, but also with the abandonment that the poor faced daily. In this way she hoped to enter, in her words, the "dark holes" of the lives of the people with whom she worked. Paradoxically, then, Mother Teresa's doubt may have contributed to the efficacy of one of the more notable faith-based initiatives of the last century.

Few of us, even the most devout believers, are willing to leave everything behind to serve the poor. Consequently, Mother Teresa's work can seem far removed from our daily lives. Yet in its relentless

and even obsessive questioning, her life intersects with that of the modern atheist and agnostic. "If I ever become a saint," she wrote, "I will surely be one of 'darkness.'"

Mother Teresa's ministry with the poor won her the Nobel Prize and the admiration of a believing world. Her ministry to a doubting modern world may have begun after she died."

Faith is not first and foremost about pious pronouncements or creedal affirmations. It is first and foremost about the engagement, the struggle, the searching and knocking and refusing to take no for an answer. This relentless wrestling with God can bear amazing fruit- whether it's dealing with an addiction or healing a relationship or holding onto hopefulness and making a difference in a hurting world.

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."

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