

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Luke 11:5-9
SERMON TITLE: Bothering God

Barbara Brown Taylor is a wonderful preacher. She tells a story about her seven-year old granddaughter named Madeline who just happens to be “blond, skinny, and tall for her age.” Madeline had a birthday party one summer. There were four people gathered around the table to celebrate. There was Madeline, Madeline’s recently-divorced mother, grandmother Barbara and Barbara’s husband, Madeline’s grandfather.

Well, as the candles burned down on the cake, Madeline listened as everyone sang the birthday song. She then leaned over and blew out the candles, but she didn’t make a wish.

Her mother asked her, “Aren’t you going to make a wish?”

Her grandfather said, “You have to make a wish.” Madeline looked as if someone had just run over her cat.

“I don’t know why I keep doing this,” Madeline said.

“Doing what?” her grandmother asked.

“This wishing thing,” she said. “Last year I wished my best friend wouldn’t move away but she did. This year I want to wish that my mommy and daddy will get back together...”

“That’s not going to happen,” her mother chimed in.

“I know it’s not going to happen,” Madeline said, “so why do I keep doing this?”

Taylor then says: “Since the issue was wishing, not praying, I left her alone that afternoon, but I know that sooner or later Madeline and I are going to have to talk about prayer. I do not want that child to lose heart. I want her to believe in a God who loves her and listens to her, but in that case I will need some explanation for why it does not always seem that way.”¹

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. Home by Another Way. Minneapolis: Cowley Publications, 1999. 198-99.

Now I wonder: How many of us here this morning have been close to losing heart and giving up in our praying? How many of us have prayed over and over again for healing to come—and healing hasn't come? How many of us have prayed over and over again for God to give us the power to overcome our fears, our failures and our weaknesses—but the power just hasn't come? How many of us have prayed over and over again for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven—only to be left with more of the same? How in the world do we keep on praying when it appears that God has not heard, much less answered our prayers?

People can lose heart and give up their faith altogether over this sort of thing. That's what happened to media mogul Ted Turner. He was raised in a strict Christian home. He's been quoted as saying: "I was saved seven or eight times." He even considered becoming a missionary. But Ted Turner lost his faith. Do you know why? When his sister's life was in danger, he prayed repeatedly and fervently that her life would be spared—but his sister died—and so did Ted Turner's faith.²

Well, my brothers and sisters, for those of us on the verge of losing heart and giving up on prayer and perhaps even on God; Jesus has a word for us today. It's a parable found in Luke's gospel: *And [Jesus] said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and get him anything because he is a friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs*

² Spokesman-Review. "Prayer, Unanswered." *Sermon Illustrations*. 17 Nov. 2008
<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/p/prayer_unanswered.htm>.

So I say to you, Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you.”

So what do we think? If someone will finally get up in the middle of the night just to placate a bothersome neighbor and to do the right thing by showing a little hospitality, can God be counted on to respond to the prayers of those in need?

Well, sometimes, God does get up and come to the door and answer our persistent prayers in just the way we had hoped. Let me tell you about Kelly. Kelly was just about to start her final year of high school when she was involved in a terrible car accident. She suffered massive head injuries.

The doctors told Kelly’s mother that Kelly would die. Well, as Kelly’s mom looked down at her daughter with her head all smashed up, tubes coming out of her, and the machines keeping her alive, she thought to herself, “What I would give right now to have you say to me in the way that do just one more time, ‘mom.’” And Kelly’s mother decided to start praying that Kelly would get well enough to call her ‘mom’ just one more time.

Well, despite the doctors’ predictions, Kelly didn’t die. In fact, she was discharged from the hospital some time later. But the girl who had been the captain of the soccer team, now couldn’t wash herself, dress herself, or feed herself. And she couldn’t talk. But her mother kept praying that Kelly would get well enough to call her ‘mom’ just once more.

Then, almost two years after the accident, out of the blue, Kelly suddenly called out one word, “mom.” And when Kelly spoke that word, she had a huge smile on her face. Over the next three weeks, Kelly kept calling out “mom, mom, mom!” But unfortunately, at the end of the three weeks, Kelly died. During this whole two year ordeal, “mom” was the only word that

Kelly ever spoke. Sometimes God answers our persistent prayers exactly in the way we had hoped.³

But at other times, God answers our prayers with a “no,” especially if we’re asking for something that’s wrong for us or something that’s outside of God’s will for us. In Gethsemane, for example, Jesus raised an anguished prayer to God: “*Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.*” So what was the Father’s answer? Did the cup of suffering pass from Jesus as he desired? No.

But now we come to the hard part. What are we do when we’re praying for something that seems good and right and in harmony with what we know of God’s will, but our persistent prayers remain unanswered? Tammi Rhone faced this problem. She was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome. She writes: “In the early days of my illness, I was constantly begging God to heal me. Over and over, I would beg him constantly to take away this disease and make me well again. Did God answer my fervent, persistent prayers? Not yet.”

But here’s the amazing thing: Tammi Rhone hasn’t lost heart; she hasn’t given up. She writes: “God wants us to be persistent in our prayers. [God] wants us to keep asking, keep knocking, even though it seems at times that God is never going to answer.”⁴ In other words: Don’t give up. Don’t be afraid of bothering God.

Now this raises an interesting question doesn’t it: Why does God have to be bothered at all? We’re not told. Instead, we’re encouraged to keep praying. As someone once said, “When you come to the end of your rope, tie a prayer knot, and hang on.”

In fact, Barbara Brown Taylor says that “the most important time to pray is when your prayers seem meaningless.” So if you don’t keep bothering God, what are you going to do?

³ Source unknown.

⁴ Source unknown.

“Take to your bed with a box of Kleenex? . . . No. Day by day by day, you are going to get up, wash your face, and go ask for what you want. You are going to trust the process, regardless of what comes of it, because the process itself gives you life. The process keeps you engaged with what matters most to you, so you do not lose heart.”⁵

And sometimes, after long, persistent prayer, answers come in unexpected ways. A number of years ago, Tim Hansel had a climbing accident in the Sierra Mountains. He has lived with severe, chronic pain ever since.

In his book, *You Gotta Keep Dancin'*, he says this: For years, people have asked me, “Haven’t you prayed to the Lord for healing?” My obvious answer: “Of course.” “Why do you think he hasn’t healed you?” “He has.” “But I thought you were still in pain.” “I am.” “I don’t understand.” “I have prayed hundreds, if not thousands, of times for the Lord to heal me—and he finally *healed me of the need to be healed.*” I had discovered a peace inside the pain.⁶ Sometimes the answers come in unexpected ways.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: “One day, when Madeline asks me outright whether prayer really works, I am going to say, ‘Oh, sweetie, of course it does. It keeps our hearts chasing after God’s heart. It’s how we bother God, and it’s how God bothers us back. There’s nothing that works any better than that.’”⁷

Now for this morning’s question: What is one life issue that causes us to bother God or that we need to bother God about?

⁵Taylor, Barbara Brown. Home by Another Way. Minneapolis: Cowley Publications, 1999. 202.

⁶ Hansel, Tim. You Gotta Keep Dancin' Boston: David C. Cook Company, 2003.

⁷Taylor, Barbara Brown. Home by Another Way. Minneapolis: Cowley Publications, 1999. 202.