

July 28, 2013 “Standing Firm in the Lord” Luke 11:1-13 Philippians 4:1-9

Each time I participate in a Bible study, I marvel to see folks have their eyes opened about the Bible and about God. Many of the stories in the Bible are lively, telling about people who never seem able to do what God asked them to do and who sneak around and steal and cheat and hurt each other. When I was young, I had no clue about this. I thought the Bible was about holy people, untouchably-good people from somewhere far away.... But the more a person reads the Bible, the more evident it becomes that the Bible is OUR story, for it fits every one of us. It is the story of our failures and God’s determination to put up with us and finally redeem us. The people of the Bible struggled to trust God, just as we do. The Bible is *our* story.

The two scripture lessons we heard today would encourage Christians to make prayer our daily priority. Paul first asked the leaders in Philippi to help two dear women, who had worked side by side with Paul, to get along. And then Paul gave us the path to peace: meet every day and every circumstance by giving thanks and praise to God. And Jesus gave the parable of persistent prayer... Don’t give up, even when it seems that God is not listening...for God is like a Father who loves his child...he will not give his child a mean snake when the child needs food to eat....

In the Gospel lesson, one of Jesus’ disciples saw him praying and asked for a lesson: “Teach us how to pray.” So Jesus gave them what we know as The Lord’s Prayer, and also the strange story about the man trying to get some help from his neighbor late at night. Some have found Jesus’ teaching here disturbing, thinking that it says God has to be badgered before God will answer our prayers... Others have suggested that Jesus used the story of the sleepy neighbor to contrast the way God is with us.... Even an in-bed-for-the-night neighbor can be roused; so how much more will your heavenly Father, who loves you more than you do yourself, move to love you? But if this is so, why does God seem to take so long in answering our prayers? And why, so often, do the prayers seem to be answered with a “no”? We do not always get what we want or plead for...

Rudy was my first really painful lesson in persistent prayer that was not answered the way I pleaded for God to answer it. Rudy had cancer, and he also had a wonderful spirit and a firm faith...he was certain that God would heal him of his cancer and restore his health. Slowly, Rudy began to lose ground, and my prayers went into overdrive. I was probably 29 years old, so I had a lot of energy to pray. I badgered God about Rudy at least every other hour. I tried to bargain with God: “Lord, take some of my health and give it to Rudy...” or “Heavenly Father, you see Rudy’s faith. Please help me and all our congregation to see the value of faith by healing Rudy.” It seemed like a really good and practical thing for God to do, in my view.... God could “kill two birds with one stone,” so to speak, by letting a great guy live a few more years and by giving me and lots of other Christians a real shot in the arm in terms of our faith... Rudy died. My faith struggled with my broken hopes, but through the years and such experiences it has grown stronger, deeper, and less dependent on my getting my own way.

There have been times, over the years, when God does seem to intervene just as we hope God will, when healing comes against substantial odds, when a tragedy is obviously averted, when

strength that was not expected is found. But the truth is, our heavenly Father gives us what we need and not always what we want. God invites us into relationship with God – which is what each of us was created to be in – and asks us to be attentive to this relationship, which is what prayer is! Prayer is whatever we do - words and actions - in our relationship with God.

Perhaps it is good to remember that any real accomplishment in life takes commitment, endurance, a willingness to struggle, and requires that other options in life be renounced. If you want to learn to speak Russian, fluent Russian, you need to go to Russia and live among the people who speak that language. If you want to have a body that is in top physical condition, you need to spend time exercising, working out, eating proper foods, and you must sacrifice the opportunity to do other things. If you want to be able to walk closely with God, you must make this a priority in your life. To have a prayer life that has meaning requires that you spend time in prayer, that you spend time not only telling God what you think you need, but that you ask God what God wants of you. Prayer is meant to be a two-way relationship. We need it, not because of what it will do for God, but because of what it will do for us.

In Nashville my husband Woody knew a woman with a multitude of ailments and illnesses. In mid life she developed a brain tumor which, though not cancerous, grew very rapidly. Only one doctor held out any hope for her. He was a surgeon who had operated on similar brain tumors before—but none of his patients had lived.

She knew this, she knew the odds were against her, and she wanted very much to live. But before she decided to risk the surgery she went away to a retreat center where she prayed on her decision for a week. When she returned, her husband asked her if God had told her to go through the surgery or not. She replied simply, “God doesn’t care what I do, it’s my decision.” “BUT,” she added, “God assured me that no matter which course I decide and no matter what happens, he will be there, and it will be all right.”

The night before she went into surgery, she told about a vision she had. It was not a dream, she said, for she was not at all asleep. She looked up and saw a man she did not know—then she recognized him, it was Jesus, and he told her in the same way he spoke to and calmed that storm, “You have nothing to worry about, no matter what happens tomorrow everything will be all right.” And she continued, “When they came to get me for surgery they said that I was the calmest patient they had ever seen. And I was the first patient to have that surgery and live.”
(Shared by W. Eddins)

We are offered a relationship. God made us. God loves us. God claims us as God’s own. God asks us to tend to our relationship with Him, to pray honestly and to pray as though our lives depended on prayer, for they really do. If we do not pray, we become like a stalk cut off from the life-giving stem... It’s like never speaking to your marriage partner, or never talking to your parents.. The relationship cannot be strong without communication.

The apostle Paul would agree. He told the Colossian Christians: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and

established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” (Colossians 2:6) And from his letter this morning, we heard, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Phil. 4:6)

In a sermon titled, "Can We Get What We Want if We Pray in Christ's Name?" the late British Methodist preacher, Leslie Weatherhead, shared a personal experience about prayer: "I remember, as a boy of 15, trying to bank Jesus' promise that 'Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do.' I wanted to pass an examination. I had had a religious upbringing. I read the words of our text carefully. They seemed too good to be true. But there they were, definite and apparently unambiguous. 'Whatsoever!' Surely a school examination could be included. You had only to add the magic formula 'in the name of Jesus,' and the thing was done! I very badly wanted to pass that test, and had worked hard for it. So, on the night before it began, I reminded God that Christ had promised, in his sacred word, that whatsoever we asked in his name we should have. What happened? I failed! And what was worse, though I didn't think so at the time, I lost a good deal of faith. It didn't seem fair. What is the good of scripture promises if they let you down just when you want them most? The lamp flickered that time. The light almost went out." (Shared by George M. Bass, esermons.com)

“Your heavenly father knows what you need....” No snakes.... Weatherhead did not pass that test, but his faith struggles ended up producing some of the best writing available concerning the will of God and human suffering. “Your father in heaven knows what you need.”

“Stand firm in the Lord.” (Phil. 4:1) Here is the challenge, and it is a huge one for many of us. Keep praying even when you don't see results. Tend the relationship. Don't stop praying even when there seems to be no hope. As long as you do your best to trust God, even if the world falls apart and you end up dying (which we all will do some day), you have done what Jesus instructed you to do, and so you have given God the gift of your obedience.

A child begs a parent for a particular item.... The parent can see that this item does not fit the long-term needs or well-being of the child. The child cannot see it at the time, only years later. The teenager wants a car. “Let me use my college money...I don't need to go to college! I've just got to have that car!” But the parent sees a longer-range benefit, and the answer about using the college money for a car is no. How much more can God see what is good for us!?!)

This week Daniel H and I were talking, and I mentioned that today's sermon was going to be about prayer, and he told me about a song by Garth Brooks entitled, “Unanswered Prayer.” In it he tells how years later he saw the woman he had begged God to give him as a partner; and how years later he saw how blessed he had been that God had NOT made that match. (*Here is a bit of the song, from Daniel's CD, “Garth Brooks, The Ultimate Hits”*)

“She was the one that I'd wanted for all time, and each night I would spend praying that God would make her mine. And if he'd only grant me this wish I asked back then, I'd never ask him for anything again...”

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers... Remember when you're talking to the man upstairs, that just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean that he don't care....Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers..."

Perspective led to thanksgiving. But God asks us to trust God so deeply and completely that we will thank God even when we have no perspective on our situation at all. That's faith, and that's a stand-firm relationship with our Lord.

May the problems, fears, burdens, and longings of our lives become the opportunities for us to learn personally the faithfulness, love, and power of God. May we stand firm in the Lord, rooted and willing to grow in Him, and in everything, to give God thanks and praise. Amen.