

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 16, 2022 – PENTECOST 19 / PROPER 24, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “Go Bang on God’s Door!”*

Genesis 32:22-31	(Jacob wrestles with God—and lives)
Psalms 121	(We look to the Lord for help; He will preserve and protect us)
2 Timothy 3:14—4:5	(Proclaim the Good News, even when it’s inconvenient)
St. Luke 18:1-8	(Jesus teaches: Keep praying; do not become discouraged)

[Knock-knock-knock] “Penny!” [Knock-knock-knock] “Penny!” [Knock-knock-knock] “Penny!” If you’ve seen the hit TV comedy, “The Big Bang Theory,” you know how annoying Sheldon can be when he wants something from his across-the-hall neighbor. Or, what about you grandparents, for whom every family excursion with young children is punctuated with: “Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” Then, there are those trips to the store accompanied by the constant refrain: “Can I have that? Can I have that?” When people in our lives persist in demanding results or incessantly ask questions, we find this *very* annoying!

So why, in today’s Gospel lesson, does Jesus hold up this persistent widow—who’s bugging the bejeebers out of the local judge—as a model for how we should *pray*? When the judge finally does relent, it’s not because of the woman’s constant pestering. In verse 5 the Greek word *hypōpiazē* used here means to harass violently, as in “to batter.” The judge feared the widow would give him a black eye, she was so wound-up!¹

We believe God is all knowing, and therefore, He is aware of what we need or want, even before we ask for it. We also believe that God is all-powerful. Therefore, He has the ability to answer any or all of our needs or wants. So why do we have to pray at all, let alone, persistently?

Yes, God knows what we want and need, but also, He desires a relationship with us. And prayer opens an avenue of communication, and communication is essential to any relationship. To pray is simply talking to God—and also, listening for His answer. Fine. So why can’t we just pray once, and be done with it? And why doesn’t God just answer our requests immediately, and move on to the next petitioner?

Well, first of all, if we only asked God for something once, and had our needs met right away, I don’t think we would pay God a whole of attention afterwards. That is, until we wanted or needed something again. Secondly, just as the widow was compelled to return to the courthouse day after day to petition the judge for her cause, if we are compelled to turn to God day after day with our requests, Jesus says how much more than even the uncaring judge will God listen to, and answer, us.

The Lord wants us to be persistent in prayer, not in order to inform an all-knowing God of our needs, but to become aware of the limits of our own capacity to meet those needs, and in doing so, to acknowledge our dependence on God.

One Bible commentator writes: “The purpose of prayer is not to put a headlock on the Almighty, forcing the Divine to cry ‘Uncle!’ and give us what we want. Prayer is not a mudwrestling match. Yet neither is it High Tea.” It is a delicate dance between being a pain in the neck and surrendering, of missing the mark and hitting it straight on. “But the only way to err in prayer is not to do it.”²

Father William Albinger, Rector of an Episcopal church in Hawaii, tells the story of a student who had been visiting a retreat house. She met with her spiritual director before leaving, and asked, “Why has my stay here yielded no fruit?” “Perhaps,” her advisor replied, “it’s because you lacked the courage to shake the tree.”³ The purpose of shaking the tree is not to change God’s mind. Rather, persistence in prayer is an expression of deep faith that invites the pervasive presence of God to move in power, in our lives.⁴

In our Old Testament lesson today, we see another lesson on persistence. Jacob wrestles with a mysterious stranger—who may be an angel, but is more likely God Himself—throughout a very long night. Jacob persists in holding onto this divine being, demanding a blessing. And in the end, he receives it.

Jacob is told that from now on, his name will be Israel, and that the nations' twelve tribes will be descended from him. It is he who will lay claim to the promises God made to Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation.

This blessing and the new name are evidence that Jacob was profoundly changed by his protracted encounter with God. On the other hand, wrestling with God left His mark on Jacob; he would walk with a limp for the rest of his days.⁵

Jacob had the courage to wrestle with God because he had the kind of faith that is found in today's Psalm 121. Here we see an expression of complete confidence in God's care and protection, such that we can persevere in whatever we do, because we trust that God is with us. "From where is my help to come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth" (121:1b-2). The assurance that our help comes from the Lord, who does not slumber or sleep, but watches over us day and night to protect us from all evil (v. 7), should give us confidence and strength to persist in prayer, even if we feel we are not being heard or answered.

As long as we are sincere in our requests, God is listening, and He will answer—eventually. Mahatma Gandhi once wrote: "[Prayer] is daily admission of one's weakness ...[but] it is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart."⁶

I began this sermon with an example of a TV character who relentlessly pounds on his —neighbor's door. But there is another One who relentlessly pounds on a door, the door to our hearts. It is Jesus Christ, who stands at the door and knocks. And *knocks, and knocks, and knocks*, until we open up and let Him in.

If you've ever looked closely at the artist Holman Hunt's famous painting of "Jesus knocking at the door," you will notice there is no handle on the outside of the door. It can only be opened from within. Jesus can pound on the door of our hearts and lives all He wants. And let's be honest: Sometimes we are aggravated by how ardently Jesus pursues us. But when we honor His persistence by opening the door and welcoming Jesus in, we will wonder why we waited so long.

Yes, persistence from other people can be annoying. But when it comes to spiritual matters, it would seem that Our Lord is showing us—through many examples—that persistence is key to effective faith and fruitful prayer.

Like Jacob, we may find ourselves somewhat hobbled after a prolonged wrestling match with God. And yet, as the Bible assures us, we will also find ourselves profoundly blessed by such an encounter. So, in the week ahead, go bang on God's door! Pray without ceasing, but also stop talking for a while and listen for His answer.

May the Lord strengthen us to always be persistent in our faith and prayers, that He may be honored and glorified. Amen!

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 20 October 2013, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Greek text analysis of Luke 18:5 [BibleHub.com](https://biblehub.com/text/luke/18-5.htm) < <https://biblehub.com/text/luke/18-5.htm> > 6 October 2022.

² H. King Oehmig, "A Widow's Persistence," *Synthesis, Year C: Proper 24* (20 October 2013), p. 4.

³ Adapt. William J. Albinger, holymaui.org, qtd. "A Widow's Persistence," *Synthesis, Year C: Proper 24* (20 October 2013), p. 2.

⁴ Adapt. "A Widow's Persistence," *Synthesis, Year C: Proper 24* (20 October 2013), p. 1.

⁵ "A Widow's Persistence," *Synthesis, Year C: Proper 24* (20 October 2013), p. 2.

⁶ Gandhi, qtd. H. King Oehmig, "A Widow's Persistence," *Synthesis, Year C: Proper 24* (20 October 2013), p. 4.