

HOW MUCH MORE!

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Grace Church in New York
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Jesus said, *“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* (Luke 11:13)

For the past six years I have served as a trustee of Episcopal Charities, the outreach arm of the Diocese of New York. Last month my two terms finally came to an end, and up at Diocesan House, in the shadows of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, I attended my last meeting. We met in a room called Donegan Hall, where the painted portraits of previous bishops hang on the walls. By chance I was seated under the gaze of Paul Moore, Jr., who was Bishop of New York from 1972-1989. Though the meeting itself was riveting, (as all church meetings are, I must add) and though Bishop Moore would have surely approved of the business at hand, my mind kept wandering to the Bishop’s long, colorful, and at times controversial ministry.

A few years before he died in 2003, Bishop Moore wrote a fascinating autobiography called Presences. In one chapter he wrote of the days when he was Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Indianapolis. It was the late 1950’s, and Paul Moore was clearly on the progressive side of the civil rights and race relations struggles of the time. He understood that Christ’s mandate for the church was *“not only to serve the poor, but also to change the conditions that led to their poverty; not only to perform social services in the name of Christ, but also to encourage poor people and blacks to join the church.”* As you might well imagine, not everyone in Indianapolis, or at stately old Christ Church Cathedral held such views, and Paul Moore soon faced an active opposition to his ministry.

It so happened that the Senior Warden of the Cathedral was none other than Mr. Eli Lilly, head of the giant pharmaceutical firm and grandson of the company’s founder. Eli Lilly was a deeply Christian man. He was conservative; he was formal and traditional. And he was absolutely clear about where the church should stand on the issues. He became concerned when the Cathedral membership seemed to be dividing up over the proactive and public stances that the young dean was taking. One day he came to see Paul Moore, and he said, *“Sorry to bother you, but I want you to know that as long as I am senior warden ... if you want to paint the church green with pink polka dots I will back you all the way. Good day, sir.”* Paul Moore went on to write that in those days, in that city, with Eli Lilly for you, few would dare be against you. And so, with the backing of Indianapolis’ number-one citizen, he was able to persevere in his ministry.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says many important things about prayer, and most of us assume his main point is perseverance. When the disciples of Jesus asked him to teach them to pray, it’s curious that he didn’t spend much time at all on technique or method. Rather, what it really seems Jesus wanted them to know was not so much *how* to pray, but that *when* they prayed they had the backing and support of none other than heaven’s number-one citizen – the Lord God Almighty. God was there. God was for them. God listened. God would back them all the way. God is our *Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend*, as today’s closing hymn puts it.

First, Jesus gave them what we know as the Lord's Prayer. Think of the Lord's Prayer not merely as something to recite by rote, but more as a framework to guide your individual conversations with the Lord. At the time, one phrase was a truly revolutionary concept: Our Father in heaven. We are bold to say: Our Father. When we pray we do not speak into empty space. The One to whom we pray is not an impersonal force, not an unfriendly enforcer of laws, not some projection of our needy imaginations, not some reckless deity who enjoys throwing lightening bolts arbitrarily from Mt. Olympus. No, when we pray, believe it or not, we have the ear and the support and the backing of a loving parent. Our Father. Take the very best of what you know of human love and goodness and mercy, magnify it beyond all reckoning, and that's whom you have at the other end of your prayers: the living, active God who is there for us. God's living, loving presence is supremely what Jesus wanted the disciples to know about prayer.

To illustrate his point Jesus told a parable. Imagine this: you are a first-century Palestinian villager who lives in extremely close proximity to your neighbors. As a Jew you have a sacred obligation to provide hospitality to strangers. So one night when you receive an unexpected guest at midnight, and you have nothing to feed him, you have a minor crisis on your hands. To whom can you turn for help? What do you do? What you do is go to the house next door where your friend and his family are sound asleep. You knock on the door until he awakens. Of course he complains that you're disturbing his whole family, but he recognizes that the boldness and shamelessness and persistence of your request convey a situation of real need. He knows that you wouldn't be banging on his door at midnight if you weren't in an emergency. You are in need, so he responds. He is there for you.

Now I ask you: is human perseverance the point of this parable? Is the point of this parable that God is a sleeping householder who grudgingly gives up some bread to get rid of us pests who keep praying? Are we to pound on God's door with our prayers as misbehaving children wear down their parents while shopping? "*I want it, I want it,*" they cry until their parents finally relent. Is perseverance the point? No, not at all. The point of the parable is this: if even the slumbering neighbor will help you, imagine *how much more* God is there for you. The three key words of today's reading from Luke are these: *how much more!* How much more is God's goodness than ours. It is an argument from the lesser to the greater. Human perseverance and technique and method of any sort is not what makes prayer effective. It is God's greater goodness that makes prayer work.

In today's reading from Genesis (18:20-33), Abraham discovered much the same thing about God. Abraham learned that the wicked towns of Sodom and Gomorrah were about to come under the judgment of God. "But," asked Abraham of God, "will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Far be it from you to do such a thing." Not even I would stoop to such levels, Abraham must have thought. So Abraham began to bargain with God: will you spare the city if fifty righteous persons are found there? How about forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? Finally God promised Abraham that even if ten righteous people were found in those cities, he would spare everyone.

On a first reading of the passage you might think it was Abraham's pesky persistence that changed God's mind, that nagged God down from his wrath, that wore God out, that badgered God into reluctantly handing over the goods like a mother who finally gives in to a whining child. But God wasn't the one changed by Abraham's prayer. Abraham was the one changed. Abraham began the conversation doubting whether God practiced the fairness and justice and mercy he would hope for from humans. He ended the conversation knowing that God is *at least* as fair and just and merciful as he was himself. So if you expect fairness and justice and mercy

from yourself and others, imagine how much more you can expect to find these qualities in the author of all goodness who is listening to our prayers and backing us all the way. God wasn't pestered into changing; Abraham changed in his estimation of God. How much more is God's goodness than ours!

Jesus pressed his point further when he asked, *"Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* Once again we have the argument from the lesser to the greater. If you have known love and tenderness in this life, if you have depended on someone and that person has always been there for you and with you without fail, if someone has loved you unconditionally and stood up for you when no one else would, then you've had the tiniest glimmer of what God is like. Then you know something about the nature of the One to whom you say your prayers. Start with what you know of human goodness, then let it point you to God's infinitely greater goodness.

So by all means persevere with prayer. Use the Lord's Prayer as a framework. Speak and listen to heaven's number-one citizen who is for you all the way. Ask, and seek, and knock. The good things God will give may not be exactly what we ask for, but they are good things that are infinitely beyond any definition we have of good. Most of all, God gives his Spirit to those who ask him. And what is the Holy Spirit but God's abiding presence, God's friendship, God's love, God with us and for us so that neither death nor life nor anything in all creation can ultimately be against us? Who knows what God has in store for us? The only thing we can say for sure is that what God plans to give us is infinitely more than we could ever ask for or imagine.

In his autobiography, Paul Moore wrote of another encounter he had with Eli Lilly. One day over lunch, quite unexpectedly, Eli Lilly informed Paul Moore that he wanted to make a substantial gift to the Cathedral's outreach ministries. Without mentioning any figures, he asked the dean to develop a plan for how such a gift might be put to use. With great excitement Paul Moore went away to confer with other leaders at the Cathedral and diocese. They decided to think big – really big – and developed a plan for outreach to the city that would cost \$100,000 – not a small sum even today, but imagine what it could do in the late 1950's. A few days later, fearing he was asking for too much, Paul Moore presented the plan. And, just as he feared, Eli Lilly was not pleased when he heard the figure of \$100,000. *"I'm not talking about chicken feed,"* he mumbled. *"Prepare something for a million dollars,"* he charged.

Such a sum was nothing that Eli Lilly could have been badgered into giving; the gift was his own idea, and he gave it freely. It was more than Paul Moore could have asked for or imagined. And yet it represents barely a fraction of the good things God has in store for us. It is a lesser shadow of God's greater goodness.

Jesus said, *"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* So ask, seek, knock. And the door will be opened to you.