



The New England Church Pulpit

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PERSISTENCE AT MIDNIGHT

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Luke 11.1-13

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

*"Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."*

And he 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 has already been 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 give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. "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. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 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 Spirit to those who ask!"

Islam

Qur'an 3.103-5

Hold fast, all together, to God's rope, and be not divided among yourselves. Remember with gratitude God's favor on you, for you were enemies and God joined your hearts in love, so that by God's grace you became sisters and brothers. You were on the brink of the fiery pit and God saved you from it. Thus does God guide you. Let there arise out of you one community, inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong; those will be prosperous.

Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields parish in London, tells the story of a conversation he had with a 90-year-old woman who had left the church many years ago and now wanted to come back. He wondered what doctrine had put her off; what comment someone had made to her that would sour her on the church for so many years. He was shocked to hear the reason. She told him

that when she was a young woman, she came to the church to be married but the church would not sanction her wedding. She was in love but the rector said no. “Why,” Wells asked. “Had your husband-to-be been married before, or was she too young to be married?” “No,” she said, as she held up her left hand. She explained that when she was 16 years old, she had had an accident in the mill where she worked, resulting in the loss of her last three fingers. “The rector said that since I didn’t have a finger to put the wedding ring on, he couldn’t marry us.”

Wells said that the color drained from his face. He reacted with a gasp as one does when one hears something so ridiculous that it seems laughable but which isn’t funny at all, and is ultimately deeply, deeply horrifying. It was so absurd that he knew it couldn’t be made up, that it had to be true, and in so realizing decided that her 75 years away from the church was a pretty lenient sentence.

“Why do you want to come back to the church now,” he asked. “Well, I figured God’s bigger than the church, and I’ll be dead soon. The Lord’s Prayer says to forgive if we want to be forgiven. So that’s what I’ve decided to do.” (*Christian Century*, July 24, 2013, p. 31)

This story is a poignant reminder of the consequences of actions that are the equivalent of giving a snake instead of fish when asked for it, and how one word, one “no, I can’t” or “you don’t qualify,” or “you’re not worthy” is the sting of a scorpion when someone has asked for an Easter egg.

I used to think that the story that follows this version of the Lord’s Prayer was about persistence in asking God for something; that God wouldn’t respond unless we kept pestering her to show that we are sincere and consistent in what we need. But I’ve come to think that this is about persistence against evil, persistent calling out that which resists responding to those in need, of something that relinquishes the comforts of a warm bed and the safety of a locked door to ply its trade in the market place of human need. Words fail to name the abomination of the rector’s refusal to unlock the door of the church and leave the comfort of his rules and regulations to affirm this women’s future, creating a 75-year midnight crisis for an innocent child in love.

The late Will Campbell, Southern Baptist minister, author, critic, holy curmudgeon and self-avowed “steeple dropout,” has, like me, always had his lover’s quarrel with the church. Loved for its mission of justice and peace, hated for its prejudice and self-righteousness, the church is an odd mixture of divine and banal all rolled into one. Campbell referred to himself as a “bootleg preacher,” someone who didn’t hesitate to buck the trend of conventional theology in the interest of human dignity and freedom. He was so outside the box and ahead of his time, especially in the conservative environment in which he lived, that a lawyer once asked him where he went to church. Campbell responded that it depended on one’s definition of church. The lawyer replied that church is a community of baptized believers, to which Campbell replied that the previous night he was in a tavern with a neighbor whose wife had just died. He watched him get drunk and helped him a bit. Campbell said that he knew the people in that tavern, and that they were all baptized believers. Church? You bet! At its best.

(*Christian Century*, July 10, 2013, p. 8)

The Rev. Kyle Childress tells of his own experience as a student pastor in a small rural Texas Baptist church during the midnight of the civil rights days. His persistence in preaching a gospel of inclusion drew the ire and ultimately a shotgun of a man who threatened to blow his black-loving head off, although the gunman used a much more offensive term. Men in the town threatened to whip his butt because he persisted in saying that Jesus was a lover of all people from all races.

Will Campbell, he said, was helpful in those days. Campbell, he said, taught him to hold the institutionalized church lightly, and not to take himself or organized religion too seriously. But, Childress said, he learned that no ministry, no service, no action is the gospel of Christ if it is not incarnated in flesh and blood community, relationship and friendship. That means living in hope in the midst of tragedy and ministering to the hurt in helpful, practice ways wherever we find it and in whatever way best helps those in crisis. It means being tenaciously persistent in the darkest of midnights to rouse the conscience of those who need to join the bread brigade even when it disturbs our comfy and tidy theologies. (Christian Century, July 10, 2013, pp12-13)

It means coming out from behind the safety of one's popularity as modeled by Stevie Wonder who has taken a stand against the "Stand Your Ground" laws by cancelling performances and refusing to sing in states where such laws perpetuate and condone violence.

It means being persistent when we'd most like to be comfortable. It means rousing ourselves from our peaceful midnight slumber to respond to the midnight witching hour when another's ghosts and the demons raise their ugly heads. It means standing firm when we are reminded of our frailty as confirmed by the doctor's report; when we're reminded of our vulnerability by our friend's death; when we're reminded of the cruelty of life when the tragedy of others makes our lives seem like a walk in the park by comparison; when we're reminded that religious tradition is here to serve the greater human cause more than others to serve it. Though evil lurks behind every chime of the midnight clock, a persistent faith transforms the news of doom into the beginning of a new day and the hope of sunrise. Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

What saves us is not the comfort and safety of a system that protects some and not all. What saves us are the millworkers who give the church another chance after 75 years. What saves us is the Will Campbells who are willing to make of a bar and a pitcher of beer a place of respite and consolation in the midst of the midnight crisis. What saves us is the persistence of people of faith who do not give up against the evils that rain midnight upon the soul; the persistence of people who will forgive even when forgiveness is totally illogical. What saves us is our willingness to get out of our comfortable systems, unlock the doors, and in the midnight chill stand beside those in the darkness until the morning comes. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann