

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12C)

Bold Approach

Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-19; Luke 11:1-13

Almost twenty years ago, when I was in the process of formally discerning my call to be ordained in the Church, I was blessed with a wonderful mentor, the Reverend Gene Britton. Under his guidance, I was preparing to preach my very first sermon, without benefit of any study except forty years of sitting in a pew and listening. As I read and re-read three rich lessons and a psalm, it began to dawn on me that there was far too much to work with and make sense of in ten minutes or so. I expressed my bewilderment to Gene. He chuckled and gave me a word of warning that also gave me great comfort: “Remember,” he said, “that every sermon is an exercise in heresy—because you can never tell the whole truth!”

Today I preach my final Sunday sermon as a priest of Bruton Parish, and three weeks from now I will begin a much-anticipated retirement. I am faced once again, and for the last time in this place, with so much rich stuff to work with that all I can do is stand up here and try to speak a tiny bit of the truth. There is so much I could say, so much to dig into in all these lessons—never think that one shot could possibly do them justice! Not even the next three weeks straight would give time enough to explore them all fully; so I’ll focus on the gospel: there’s more than enough there to occupy us today.

“Focus” is a particularly good word, actually, for what I want to share with you: focus is one important thing that Jesus seems to have, wherever you read in any of the Gospels. He focuses his attention on the person before him in any given moment, whether it’s a sick woman or a crippled man or a child who is by all appearances dead. He turns from a wide focus on great crowds of people and narrows down to teach the smaller group of his close disciples. He carefully watches people on the street and officials in the temple and elements of the natural world, and uses what he observes to point out and act out the ways God works with humanity. And most particularly when he prays, which is very often, he focuses on and dwells in the incredibly intimate relationship he shares with God, whom he knows as Father.

It seems to me that it is Jesus’ focused way of being with God that is at the root of his disciples’ request for instruction in prayer; indeed, it is at the core of why people are drawn to him, both in the Scriptures and to this day. Jesus knows deeply who he is, because he knows deeply who God is; and out of that depth, born in prayer-conversation, he is able to know each of us and invite us to share that relationship and act on the strength of it.

The dual relationship with both God and other people is a circle that never ends, or perhaps a reciprocating arc where one focus grows out of the other and then back into it again. The fact is that a *relationship with God*, built in prayer, bears fruit in an active life of loving *human* relationships, and the effort of living that focused life leads one back, again and again, to seek equally focused time with God.

It is that reciprocating arc or circle of focused prayer and active ministry that Jesus models for his friends, obviously gaining strength in the quiet time with God, and obviously using that strength in his ministry with God’s people.

But a circle is a simple shape, and it's been my experience that life is not simple; and it seems to get less simple with every passing year. All those complications—and each of us has our own set of them—are very distracting. We're not much different from Martha, whose story we heard last week, distracted by many things from paying attention to Jesus in the profoundly focused way her sister Mary did.

Today's Gospel reading directly follows that story, and just before it, the story of the Good Samaritan. Together the three add up to drive home the point that Jesus has been developing. With the disciples, we have watched all this and begun to understand that both quiet attention and “going and doing” are important, and it seems that the two actually lead into and out of each other. But how do we discern what is critically important, where we are to focus and really pay attention? What do we pray for?

The *Book of Common Prayer* names seven kinds of prayer in the Catechism, all of which are important: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition.¹ Disciples of Jesus, both then and now, know all of these; and many of us try very hard to include all of them as we pray, working doggedly through one kind and then the next, trying to stay focused and centered on God. The fact that the prayers of asking come at the end of the list may make us feel a bit guilty, if we find ourselves beginning our prayers with a cry for help rather than adoration or thanks. Now, I wouldn't want to suggest the Prayer Book is off the mark...but when the disciples ask, Jesus answers their plea with something more tailored to real life and who we really are: this is a very practical, deeply *human* prayer.

First, he tells them (and us), remember that your prayer is addressed to a God who loves and who created you to be in relationship, not only with other people, but with Godself. Be bold as you approach, he says: call God by the most intimate name you know, the name you have for the one who never fails to love and protect you. And having entered into that loving space with childlike trust, remember, too, that God is holy beyond human understanding, and completely other—“hallowed be your name.” Acknowledge the simple truth that God's purposes and desires are likely to be bigger than yours, and set your heart on sharing the great vision of God's kingdom come to fullness here on Earth.

You have wrapped yourself in the intimacy of God's loving purpose, enormous as it is, and found you are safe. Boldness is called for again: here in the presence of Love Almighty, what is it you need? Careful—don't confuse needs with mere wants, but don't be afraid to ask!

Daily bread is necessary, of course. You have to eat. And though we engage in work that brings bread to our table, the stuff that sustains our life is ultimately never our own creation; it belongs to God, and God presents it all—*all*—as gift. God knows what you need and God gives, purely out of love, every day.

Body fed, you recognize another kind of hunger: the soul food of deep relationship one with another. Because we are so needy, so full of fear, we wound each other, and in so doing we cause God unfathomable grief. “Forgive us,” you pray, though you find it hard to speak the details of your guilt. “Forgive us our sins.” And with the shadow of guilt and fear lifted, you are able to offer a lighter, more forgiving heart to those who have hurt you. Relationship can be restored, is restored, when you give Love a chance to overcome anger and fear.

¹ “An Outline of the Faith” begins on page 849; the section on Prayer and Worship, on page 856.

The final petition brings the prayer full circle, back to the kind of trust that allows you to place your hand in God's, confident you will not be brought into times of trial beyond your endurance. This God, after all, for all the power and glory, loves you. In your need, God gives. In your sinfulness, God forgives. In your vulnerability, God protects and guides.

So be bold, Jesus says! Be persistent! Be cheeky, even, like Abraham, and don't ever give up asking! You are worth everything to God, and God will give you every good gift; you can bet your life on that. It's what Jesus himself did, remember: deep in fear, still he could focus on the relationship they shared. Even in Gethsemane, he trusted the loving purpose of his divine Father, and on the other side of his terrible time of trial he was raised to new life.

We say this prayer of our Lord every time we gather to worship, whether there are hundreds of us or only two or three. The focus and purpose of all our worship is to attend to our relationship with God, following as nearly as we can Jesus' example of focused prayer and ministry. As our Savior taught us, we are bold to name our need and our hope before the God who loves us and gives us more than we can ask.

Mollie Douglas Turner+
Bruton Parish Episcopal Church, Williamsburg, Virginia
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