

“Shamelessness”, a sermon based on Luke 11:1-13 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 28 July 2019.

There is a word in the translation of the Bible we use at Knox (the New Revised Standard Version) that names how people have interpreted this part of Luke. The word is in Luke chapter 11 which in my version has the heading “perseverance in prayer”. It’s in the story of the person who goes to his friend at midnight to ask for three loaves of bread. The friend inside doesn’t want to give the bread. Then comes verse 8: “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.”

It sounds strange, that friendship is not enough to cause the friend to give help but persistence is. That word persistence has also been used to understand the next section. Many times I have heard the next section interpreted- ask and keep asking and it will be given you; search and keep searching and you will find, knock and keep knocking and the door will be opened.” The point - keep praying, persevere, persist. But what kind of God is this? A reluctant god who needs to be nagged? A god who is unaware and who needs to be roused? A god who needs to be harassed into action? Does God’s response depend on me persevering in prayer? Do we need to catch God’s attention?

I have learned that in contrast many scholars translate the Greek word *anaida* not as persistence but as shamelessness. So verse 8 reads “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his shamelessness he will get up and give him whatever he needs.” It sets us on a different path. Of whose shamelessness is it speaking? The one asking is shameless for asking at midnight and disturbing the friend. But so is the disturbed friend shameless for getting up, clattering around, disturbing the household and handing over three loaves of bread.

The consensus is that this passage is about the person who responds and that person sets the tone of this whole section of Luke. This is a story about a shameless god. A god who despite his friend’s outlandish behaviour, breaks the norm, gets up at midnight, disturbs his family, probably wakes his neighbours, looks for bread, and gives his friend three loaves. The final result is that the midnight visitor is not shamed but honoured with three loaves of bread. Yes, the difficulty of responding is described in grumpy detail to make the point as to who will be disturbed, but then the midnight visitor is given what he needs. Here is a god who turns any shame to honour, and that is god’s nature.

Jesus refers to that god as his father, as one who offers intimate care, as one who shapes the life of the son. In the Lord’s Prayer, the word is *abba*, daddy, a childlike word. And we face the challenge of gendered imagery. The limits of gendered imagery were recognised early in the Christian movement. In the fourth century St John Chrysostom named god father, spouse, sister and mother. Around 1100 St Anselm prayed: “Truly, thou art a mother, the mother of all mothers, who tasted death, in thy desire to give life to thy children.” In the fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich: “But our true Mother, Jesus, he alone bears us to joy and endless living.” Each was trying to find a way of describing god’s essential nature of grace, of intimate relating.

Now this is a sermon at least in part about shame, and gender plays a role in relation to shame. Researchers have studied advertisements to show how messages of shame are organised around gender. One speaker described a typical ad portraying the ideal woman – “Do it all, do it perfectly and never let them see you sweat.” For men, any weakness is shameful. And since vulnerability is often perceived as weakness, it is especially risky for men to practice vulnerability. They must remain strong and resilient.

No wonder then that Carl Jung calls shame “the swampland of the soul”. It paralyses us. We become afraid to fail and therefore afraid to risk. Shame is the critic that points at you and laughs, that whispers in your ear “You are not good enough. Who do you think you are?” And who is the voice of that critic? Mostly, ourselves.

Martin Luther - "Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. Far from loving that righteous god who punished sinners, I actually loathed him. I was a good monk, and kept my order so strictly that if ever a monk could get to heaven by monastic discipline, I was that monk. All my companions in the monastery would confirm this ... and yet my conscience would not give me certainty, but I always doubted and said, "You didn't do that right. You weren't contrite enough. You left that out of your confession."

Now, perhaps we will point out people in our world we wish had a greater sense of shame – serial liars for example. Perhaps some shame is better than none, an inevitable by-product of empathy. Perhaps shame is so much part of life it is hard to imagine a relationship without it. We remember our many errors and omissions, and if we forget, there are people to remind us, and if not people in the flesh, at least people in our dreams to remind us.

However, In the reading today we meet a shameless god who does not shame people. A god who responds with utter grace regardless of how we feel about who we are. A god who will not let our shame get in the way of life, of love, of joy.

Prayer begins with that kind of god, who invites us to centre our lives on this non-shaming relationship. What freedom! We are not the key that makes prayer "work". We are invited instead, to come to the friend at midnight, and ask for bread, knowing that the one listening will respond. Here is a god with whom we can be utterly honest, absolutely transparent, completely candid and with whom we do not need to pretend. Because that god will not use anything about us to shame us.

So the next passage becomes about asking plainly and directly. Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. The poet Mary Oliver speaks of such plainness in praying:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Ask, search, knock. But let's see what is promised here. The last verse in the section: "If you then know how to give to your children, how much more will the heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him." God promises the gift of the Spirit. And Jesus shows how to pray for her and for the kingdom she is part of - Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. A pattern for praying. It's plain and direct. We can pray this prayer, unabashed, as asking for bread at midnight. And in the process, God forms a people who receive the Spirit and who are sent out as agents of the coming reign of God. They don't receive all their wishes or even "good things". They receive the Spirit of the kingdom.

Here is an invitation, above all else, to the candour that comes from intimacy. Prayer is a response to an invitation to be in relationship with a God who desires to be known chiefly as loving parent, provider of all that is good and protector of all in need. While this may not give us everything we want, it at least gives us what we most need.