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***“Worship
Habits of the Heart”***

Luke 11:1-8

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My parents will tell you that when I was a toddler, my head was too big for my body. Unfortunately, they have evidence to prove it: home movies that show me running with my head, too big to hold up straight, bobbing from side to side.

This sermon looks like that. My introduction is too big for the sermon. The introduction is longer than normal because I am introducing not only the sermon, but the entire sermon series, “Habits of the Heart.” For those who have lunch plans and tea times, though, we’re going to get out on time.

What guides us in life? Read Malcomb Gladwell. Read Michael Polanyi, Jonathan Haidt, and Dan Ariely. The growing consensus these days reflects the old thinking of David Hume and the ancient thinking of the Apostle Paul. Facts and logic are tools, but ultimately do not guide us. They can’t. Life is too complex to accumulate all the needed data and to think everything through. Sensing danger without knowing why is often enough for a wise person to get away. Sensing holiness is all we can have of knowing God sometimes... and often is enough.

Some of us would like to think that we are rational creatures; that given good facts, we will reason our way to good decisions. Sure, some are better at using the tools of facts and logic than others, but in the end, we all are guided not by what we *know* to be true but by what we *trust* to be true.

And what do people trust? A good indication is to watch their patterns of behavior, the habits of their lives. What do you see?

My wonderful father-in-law, Jesse Parks, was a Presbyterian pastor who spoke plainly, even bluntly. He got away with it, I think, because he also had a wonderful sense of humor. He



sometimes prayed a shocking prayer of dedication after the offering was taken. After the ushers came up the aisle with the offering plates and everyone bowed their heads, Jesse would pray: “No matter what we say we do, this is what we think of you. Amen.”

Now this is not a Commitment Sunday sermon, so let’s quickly look at Jesse’s prayer as a metaphor that is about much more than the money put in an offering plate. No matter what we say we do, it is in the habits of our lives that we reveal who we are or who we are trying to become.

Who we are and what we are trying to become. When it comes to the heart and habits, it is a two way street. Trust and habits feed each other.

For good or for ill. Trust can be misplaced and our habits can be destructive. As necessary as it is that we live by trust, it is also the scary truth that the greatest harm we can do to ourselves, each other, and the planet comes of misplaced trust. Trust in possessions can express greed, and greed can build trust in possessions. And over time, Gollum loses his better self in his obsession with the ring.

That ring of the trilogy, *Lord of the Rings*, could stand for cruelty, indifference, selfishness, power... We lose our better selves when heart and habit begin feeding each other in a dehumanizing loop.

In this sermon series, we are going to talk about the heart and habits of faith. We are going to talk about those disciplines that both express a heart that trusts Jesus, and also forms the heart that loves Jesus.

So much for the head that is too large for the body. Let’s move to the sermon and consider the value of worship, which we will think about through the prism of prayer. Listen for God’s word in the reading of Luke 11:1-8.

He 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.” ² He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

⁵ 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; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷ 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.’ 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.



I believe there is only one place in the Gospel of Luke where the disciples ask Jesus to teach them something. In a way, it is surprising what it is they want to learn.

- Jesus performs miracles; he heals the sick, he casts out demons, he even raises a man from the dead. They don't ask him how to do any of that.
- He preaches powerful sermons, revealing the heart of God in the heart of the Law. But the disciples don't ask him how to preach.
- He is a wonderful teacher, too. Wow, can he tell stories to make a point. Want to know about grace? He'll tell you a story of a man with two sons. You won't forget it. Want to know about compassion? He'll tell the story of a hated Samaritan coming to the help of a Jew on the side of the road. You won't forget that one either because it is inspiring *and* irritating. But the disciples don't ask him how to teach like that.
- Jesus is good at speaking the truth even when others don't want to hear it. That includes those who are close to him that he is tempted to please- his family, his neighbors, his disciples. It includes those who are opposed to him that he is tempted to avoid- some Pharisees, Sadducees, and other religious leaders who see him as a threat. It includes those who have the power to have him killed from whom he is tempted to escape: like Pilot and Herod. But the disciples don't ask him how they can find the courage- the nerve- to speak truth even when it is awkward, unwelcome or dangerous.

Let's be clear. Jesus does try to teach the disciples these things. In the previous two chapters, he taught the disciples about mission trips and casting out demons. But what the disciples *ask* to learn is how to pray.

I think it is because they sense that in worship and prayer, one finds the vision, the courage, and the power to do everything else faith demands. They sense that everything that Jesus does- everything that Jesus is about- seems to come from prayer. The disciples see this over and over again. Jesus separates himself from the crowds, even from the disciples sometimes, to go off to pray. They see how over and over again, Jesus attends synagogue to pray with others, even with those with whom he disagrees. They see this pattern of prayer and worship, and then see the passion and energy by which Jesus deals with crowds. Then they see the fierce attention he gives to individuals while the crowds wait. They want to begin where Jesus begins so they can keep up. "Teach us how to pray."

Let's not get too romantic about worship here, thinking that worship in the presence of Jesus, or in the times of the Bible, is something more powerful and magical than what we can know today. I think the disciples have the same experience many have today.

- Not every time they bow their heads in prayer do they sense the sweet, sweet presence of God.
- Not every time they go to worship do they hear the angels sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy."
- Not every time does God's train seem to fill the place of worship.



They hear sermons and lessons they do not understand. Read the Gospels, you'll see many examples of their not getting it.

In our passage, they are taught what we now know as the Lord's Prayer. Though Jesus himself teaches them this prayer, I know there are times they will later pray the prayer just the way we sometimes pray that prayer. The words will come out like dehydrated fruit; spoken, but dry; flavored with content, but with no juice.

I am not speculating here. I'm not just saying it because it is nice to think that the disciples are just like us. I know the disciples have the same experience all of us do; the experience where prayer seems not only unanswered but unheard; the experience where it seems God is not particularly present in worship, and where it seems that God isn't speaking. I know this to be the case because of the parable Jesus tells after teaching the disciples what we now call "The Lord's Prayer."

Jesus offers a scenario. He asks each disciple to imagine needing food to feed an unexpected guest. I could go into Palestinian culture and tell you why showing the hospitality of a meal to a guest- even unexpected and uninvited- is so important, but for the sake of time, just trust me. *It's important.* It is important enough for the disciple to go to a friend's house late at night to get some bread.

The problem is that it *is* late: the door is locked, the lights are out. It is as if the friend is not even there.

And prayer is like that sometimes, isn't it? Worship is like that sometimes, isn't it? The door shut, the lights out. We pray for an answer, and it doesn't come. We pray for a healing and we can't see it. The sermon doesn't speak to us... or we simply disagree. The prayer of confession? We don't feel it. The Affirmation of Faith? We don't mean it... not that Sunday anyway. God won't answer the door. Or maybe God's attention is needed elsewhere; "Do not bother me. My children are in bed, I need my sleep, and I don't have it in me to get up and give you anything."

But in the parable the friend eventually provides the bread. Why?

"Persistence," Jesus says. It is the habit of prayer by which bread comes.

Before I go on, let's get something straight. This passage and the one that follows it is often misunderstood because it is thought to be about technique. "You want to know how you get what you want from God, then pray like this..."

No, that is to think of prayer as worship..., as magic. It is magic, not faith, to think that if you just pray hard enough, or maybe enlist enough others to pray with you- maybe gather in the same spot, or at the same hour- maybe get enough people to "Like" or "Share" a prayer on Facebook- then God would have no choice but to give you exactly what you want just to shut you up. God would then forget about the ones who don't have advocates or the numbers- children without parents, the oppressed without rights or voice, the sick without insurance, or even the shy who find it too painful to ask others for their prayers. God would forget about them because God has no choice but respond to those who nag. (*The Parable of the Inopportune Widow and the Unjust Judge* is misunderstood in the same way).

No, Jesus' parable is not about God in prayer. It is about the disciples in prayer. It is about you and me in prayer. It is not about God's transformation, but our own. Jesus is encouraging a



persistence of prayer so a pattern of prayer becomes a means by which we are transformed- our hearts are changed, our habits formed. Worship is transformational as it is continual (“without ceasing” is the way Paul put it). It is a habit of heart that also shapes the heart. That is the bread we need.

So, “be persistent,” Jesus says. Make prayer and worship a habit of your life.

At this point, it might be good for me to offer the best definition of a habit that I came upon in my research this week. It came from a highly reputable source: a kindergarten teacher who happens to be my wife. I was trying to tell her what I wanted to say about habits of the heart when she said I was being too academic. Millie said, “I’ll tell you what I tell my kindergarteners: ‘Habits are those things we do without thinking about it. There are bad habits, like putting your hair in your mouth and coughing without covering your mouth. And there are good habits, like brushing your teeth and cleaning your desk when you are finished with your work.’”

The older I get, the more I appreciate what sounds like an oxymoron: the freedom that comes with following commands. Energy is saved and energy is gained for the other decisions that need to be made. Prayer and worship can be called “persistent” when they are no longer choices. The commanded habit of worship then cuts grooves in us: the groove of humility so that we don’t have to pretend, the groove of generosity so we don’t have to be convinced, the groove of compassion so we don’t have to be forced.

And so, when we come to worship, we persistently pray, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name.” Over and over again we bow our heads, or kneel, or do whatever it is that we physically can do to remind ourselves that we are not in control, and that God’s world is going to revolve with or without us... with our without the human race. Over and over again, we sing our hymns of praise, and we offer our prayers of adoration. We remind ourselves that the one who created me is not me. I’m here on earth, and God is in heaven.

We persistently pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It may not dawn on us each and every time we worship, but by worshipping over and over again, it just might get through to us that what we really should be praying for most is not what we want, but for what God wants. If we are to have lives suffused with grace and shining with the light of God’s love, then that means we are a means and not the end. We are part of something and not the end of something. And so we listen for a word in the sermon that is not our own. We listen for that word of Jesus that is not always what we want to hear.

We consistently pray, “Forgive us our wrongs and we forgive those who wronged us.” Over and over again, we pray the prayer of confession, asking for pardon, and asking for the power to forgive. We do so habitually because guilt can consume us and so can hatred. We do so because we know that if revenge or retribution is what we are after, we can keep knocking all we want but that is not the bread God has to give us. And so we keep confessing so that when we knock and ask, we’ll eventually ask *for the same things Jesus asks for in prayer*.

Prayer and worship happens in and out of church, and not just on Sundays. There are all kinds of ways we can worship together and they are not limited to how we used to worship here at Second, how we worship now on Sunday mornings or Wednesday evenings during Lent, or how



we will worship a few years from now... Worship will keep evolving here or we will die as a church as so many have done. The Spirit of God doesn't stand still, and neither does worship or prayer.

What is critical, though, is that worship be a habit or practice that shapes a heart of humility and obedience. Because if it does, then everything else that comes of a life of faith can come from a centered place.

Friends, I cannot tell you how much time, energy, and work goes into providing opportunities of worship here at Second Presbyterian. We are going to continue to do our very best to make sure we don't abuse the privilege of having people show up to pray with others. We want to stay grounded in tradition and fresh with innovation so fill out the survey to help us do that. But it is not entertainment or magic that we are after here... not for you or for God. What we are about is sharing the habit together of returning over and over again to scripture, prayer, sermon, sacrament, and song so that hearts and lives will reflect the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, and so we might receive the bread we need for ourselves, and the bread we can share with others.

