

“Excuse Me! Pardon Me!”

Psalm 85; Luke 11:1-13 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might learn to trust in your mercy as we strive to balance peace and righteousness in our hearts and souls. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

One might assume this would be a sermon about the Lord's Prayer, since we just read Luke's version of Jesus teaching it to his disciples. And I'll get there, to some degree, eventually. But there's just so much else going on in these verses, I need to deal with some other things first. It's not my fault Jesus is such an evocative storyteller! I just can't get over the drama that he plops down in the middle of this discourse on prayer. It's like something that happens between Homer Simpson and Ned Flanders, or Wilson and the Taylor family on "Home Improvement."

Even just the first line... "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight—" What?! Who shows up at their friend's house, uninvited, at midnight?! But this is supposed to be us, the listeners, so we must assume that Jesus is trying to help us understand that some of what we ask God for is kind of unreasonable. But then it turns out there's a third friend, who is also unreasonable, because that friend turned up – possibly unannounced, since we didn't have any food ready – also at midnight. Honestly though, we don't know the backstory there. Maybe the friend

turned up at midnight because of something terrible that happened – a house fire, a trip with too many mishaps, whatever. At least it's nice to know that we're not banging on our friend's door at midnight simply on our own behalf. I guess that makes it slightly more plausible.

But then there's the friend whose door is being pounded on. Talk about relatable. "Buddy! What are you doing? I was sleeping! Do you have any idea what time it is? Now you've woken the baby! I'm not coming down there. You don't want me to come down there! The door's locked. We're closed. Go away!"

You notice Jesus didn't mention how close of a friend this person is. Because once we've gone to bed, does it matter? Maybe, but that doesn't mean that we're not going to work our way through this litany of excuses before doing anything else, even for our closest friends. And what Jesus is saying here is that it doesn't matter how close the friendship is, because the thing that gets the sleeping friend out of bed isn't the friendship anyway; it's the fact that we don't stop banging on the door until they come down and open it up.

It's so interesting to me that Jesus' answer to his disciples about how to pray ends up including so much teaching about how we treat one another. But what if we narrowed the lens even tighter than that? I often think one fruitful approach to parables is to apply that rule of dream interpretation that says you should assume you are all the people in your dream. The characters in parables are often one-

dimensional portrayals of human traits. So to assume we are all the characters gives us a fuller, more accurate way to apply these scriptures to our own lives. We are the person banging on the door at midnight, both because we are sometimes unreasonable and because sometimes we are compelled to go beyond the norms of decency to help others. We are also sometimes the neighbor tucked snugly into bed, with a litany of excuses why we shouldn't be expected to get up and help someone. It was those excuses that made me notice the tension hidden in the middle of this story, a tension that lives within all of us trying to live faithfully with good conscience. Jesus' prayer invites us to ask God's forgiveness, even as we ourselves forgive our debtors. It's probably the line that most people trip up on, because it feels so presumptuous. We've just named God's great holiness and sovereignty, and now we're offering ourselves up as paragons of mercy for God to emulate? Have you ever worried that maybe God will only forgive you as much as you forgive those who've sinned against you? It's not a measure any of us would likely fare well against. So what does it mean that right after this example of a prayer that focuses so strangely on forgiveness, Jesus tells us a relatable story full of excuses?

I don't think I'm the only one with an ongoing internal struggle in which I'm constantly trying to figure out what qualifies as appropriately giving myself grace and what constitutes making excuses when I really could do better. Our culture certainly doesn't help, with its constant pressure to achieve and accomplish accompanied by

continual messages about self-care and setting boundaries. What is a boundary? How do we know it's not just an excuse? Are we putting our own oxygen mask on first, or are we just looking for a reason to refuse to extend ourselves for someone else's benefit? We long to believe that God doesn't want us living in constant fear and stress over whether we're good enough, but we also know that the world is full of suffering we could conceivably help staunch. How do we balance these competing pressures?

I hadn't thought of it before these two scripture lessons were thrown together in this week's lectionary, but I wonder if verses 10 from Psalm 85 are speaking to this tension. Let me read it again: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other."

I've usually just assumed that steadfast love and faithfulness are like dance partners, moving in perfect harmony; that righteousness and peace are two names for basically the same thing. But what if steadfast love and peace in these two embraces represent the grace that offers us relief when we admit we will never be able to do all the good we wish we could? And what if faithfulness and righteousness are the ache that keeps pushing us to try harder? And what if these countervailing forces embracing is the relief when that balance arrives, when we finally find rest in the merciful and just arms of God? The whole psalm has gone back and forth and back and forth about whether God's forgiveness and salvation are at hand or not, but in the end, hope wins the day. The infernal turmoil of striving and falling short is cut off, as

grace envelopes all the impulses toward virtue and the shame of all the moments when we failed to be virtuous.

“Excuse me! Pardon me! Excuse me! Pardon me!” we say as we try to make our way quickly through a crowd. But at another level, we know that excuses and pardon aren’t the same thing. We may never truly master the difference, but we know we’ve got to keep trying. The main thing Jesus was trying to tell us about prayer, after all, was to keep at it. There’s a reason that prayer references bread for each and every separate day. Every day. Every day we ask for bread, for ourselves, for our friend who’s just arrived, for the children – our own and the ones we’ll never meet. Every day we struggle against the excuses that rise up in our throats when we’re asked to extend ourselves a little further – I’m comfortable right where I am, it will disturb my family, the moment when I was open to doing that passed. Any day any of us could find ourselves in a situation where we have to make unreasonable demands on others, loudly, repeatedly, persistently. Keep knocking, Jesus says, just keep knocking. God is already awake. God knows what you need, and God knows what you can take. God knows what you’re capable of, and God knows who you can help. God’s already thought of all of your excuses, and God thinks you’re adorable. God knows you need to eat, and God knows all the hungry children need to eat. So keep knocking. Hallelujah and Amen.