

On God's Case: Luke 11:1-13

by [Stephanie Frey](#) in the [July 13, 2004](#) issue

While making nursing home and hospital calls one day, I visited several people who were on oxygen. A slim green hose ran from a machine to each person's nostrils, piping in pure air to make his or her breathing easier. In each instance we prayed the Lord's Prayer together in preparation for Holy Communion, our hands joined and our voices speaking together. I was struck by the strength with which each of these people prayed. Their bodies were weakened in many ways, yet the prayer flowed vigorously from their lips, as if the prayer as well as the oxygen was helping them breathe.

In this long green season of the Holy Spirit, the words of the prayer Jesus taught the disciples are like the very air we breathe. They are so engrained in our hearts and minds that they are as wonderfully automatic as the motion of the diaphragm that pushes on our lungs, compelling us to inhale and exhale. The disciples ask Jesus, "Teach us to pray. Help us learn what we have seen you do." Jesus responds by giving them a prayer, a set of petitions that we still teach and learn inside out, forward and backward. But he doesn't let the disciples go without adding one more thing: an odd little parable of sorts, with some curious comments about gifts.

An annoyingly persistent neighbor comes pounding on the door of a house nearby, looking for food to give to an unexpected guest. It's midnight, and the irritated occupant calls out in exasperation, "Hey, get outta here! If you think I'm going to get up at this hour and get something for you, you're mistaken!" He can't believe this is happening now, just when the dogs in the alley have finally quit barking and his kids have finally drifted off to sleep. He doesn't want to upset this hard-won tranquillity. According to Jesus, however, the neighbor persists, and eventually the poor householder relents, not out of the charities of friendship but simply for the sake of his own peace and quiet.

This isn't the loveliest image one could imagine for talking about prayer, and yet it is a powerful one. Anyone who's spent time around young children knows that they make constant demands: they persist and insist and refuse to be ignored. They barely give their mother or father a chance to respond before repeating their

requests. And this is exactly how we should pray, Jesus says. We should pray like this neighbor, like young children. We ought to pray persistently and without ceasing. Ask and keep on asking. Seek and keep on seeking. Knock and keep on knocking. The promise is that we will receive.

Really? Things seldom work out that neatly. Most of us have prayed for many things, good things, and not just for ourselves. We've prayed desperately, in fact, and still not received what we were seeking.

Who hasn't prayed over a child, that his pain in venturing out into the world would not be too great, only to have him wandering into trouble with cars, drugs or irresponsible relationships? Who has not prayed that someone be cured of the cancer that saps her life, only to stand at a grave a week later commending her soul to God and committing the body to the earth?

There are those who have prayed to keep their job, only to get to work a few days later and receive a layoff notice tucked in with a final paycheck. There are those who pray daily for peace, then awaken at first light to hear from the radio that a new war has begun or that an old one has taken more lives.

What are we to make of these prayers? It's easy to think that we've not been doing it right, not praying hard enough, not using the right words. Or that perhaps God has enough to do just holding the planets in their orbits and the stars in their courses.

Let's move backward through the text, back past the parable of the neighbor to the prayer Jesus taught the disciples. Here's where we catch some good news, here where Jesus says, "When you pray, say, 'Father.'" "Father" is not the only name or form of address that we have for God, but it is what Jesus calls God here and elsewhere. When he uses this name, he gives us a picture of One who is more fatherly than our fathers, more motherly than our mothers. Here we glimpse a God who loves us enough to give us what we need rather than what we want. Here we discover a God who has shaped us in the divine image and for a godly purpose rather than for our own cravings.

I can think of no one other than Jesus who actually *encourages* us to be annoying with God. Jesus invites, even commands, us to be as shameless and irritating in our prayers as that noisy neighbor at midnight or that toddler on a hot summer afternoon. We should persist until prayer becomes the ongoing conversation between us, God's creatures, and the Creator. Then we will never come away

empty-handed from prayer, because even if we wind up with none of the things we thought we needed, we will always wind up with God listening, attending and answering our prayers in ways we hadn't imagined.

It is God's Holy Spirit who breathes into us, just as a thin green hose carries oxygen into the nostrils of people who need it in order to sustain life. The Holy Spirit gives us the words, the desire and the persistence to speak with God and make known our needs. In such holy conversation we learn to pray for any and all, to receive and recognize the generous gifts from God's hand that provide what we need from day to day. What more could we want?