

“How Much More?”  
Rev. Eric. S. Corbin  
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
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Luke 11:1-13

How much more? That's the phrase that grabbed my attention this week. It's right there at the end of our gospel lesson for today. Jesus says that earthly parents know how to give good gifts to our children, though we are evil, and then says “*how much more* will the Heavenly Father give?” This type of logic, technically known as *a fortiori*, is a common method of argumentation. If something less likely is true, then something *more* likely will probably be true as well.<sup>1</sup> Do you remember the Life cereal commercial featuring Mikey? Debuting in 1972, it played for over 12 years, ending up as one of the longest continuously running commercial campaigns ever aired. Before three brothers sits a bowl of Life cereal. Two of the brothers debate with each other over who will eat it, given that it is supposed to be “good for you.” They decide to give it to Mikey, saying “He won't eat it. He hates everything.” To their great surprise, Mikey likes the cereal. We are to understand that, if Mikey likes it though he hates *everything*, then *how much more* will less-picky children like it?

This argument is found several times in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 31, Moses says to the people: “For I know well how rebellious and stubborn you are. If you already have been so rebellious toward the Lord while I am still alive among you, how much more after my death!” If the people have rebelled against the Lord while Moses is still there, *how much more* will they rebel against the Lord after he is no longer with them?

In 1 Samuel 23, the Lord tells David to battle against a stronger army. David's men respond to him, “Look, we are afraid here in Judah; *how much more* then if we go to Keilah against

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<sup>1</sup> <http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/afortioriterm.htm>

the armies of the Philistines?” If we’re scared here in our own territory, can you imagine how much more scared we’ll be in enemy territory?

However, given all of the news of violence, unrest, prejudice, and dishonesty, I find myself agreeing with seminary professor Karoline Lewis, who writes “But ‘how much more’ in different contexts has very different meanings, doesn't it?”<sup>2</sup> She says that “how much more” can be mundane or fraught with great trepidation. “How much more cleaning do I have to do in my room,” my children regularly ask. “How much more do I have to eat before I can have dessert” is another common question in our home. We might also ask “How much more time do we have before the project at work is due?” “How much more money is there in the budget?” The questions get deeper, though. “How much more can I handle the demands of work and home?” “How much more arguing with my spouse can I endure?” “How much more time do I have, doctor?” “How much more can we bear of the strife, violence, and terrorism of our world?” “How much more hateful rhetoric from the political sphere can we consume without losing all hope for the future of this country?”

How much more, O God? How much more?

This passage from Luke today speaks to us about prayer. We rightfully cry out to God – surely a form of prayer – asking “How much more, O God?”

Jesus tells a story of someone who goes to a friend’s home at midnight, asking for some bread to give to a traveler. There is much underlying this story. We need to understand the importance of social rules of hospitality in that culture. If a friend arrived and one had nothing to serve them, this would be seen as a great offense, and so the person tries to borrow some bread. However, the one inside the house calls back, “leave me alone. We're all in bed.” In a typical one-room home, getting up to answer the door, find some bread, and give it to the friend would

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4690>

necessarily awaken the household. Today, even with separate bedrooms, I can tell you that I surely don't want someone knocking on the door at midnight, so *how much more* would it be true then! So, he says, "I cannot get up and give you anything." Jesus then says that if the one at the door is persistent, he will get what he needs. Other versions say "if you stand your ground, knocking and waking all the neighbors" or "he will get up and give his friend whatever he needs because of his friend's brashness." The man in the home finally succumbs because of how rudely persistent the visitor at the door is and because the visitor is waking all the neighbors, before whom this man does not want to be seen as inhospitable.

Jesus then says prayer is like this, and we wonder does this mean that we have to metaphorically bang on God's door over and over to get God to give in to what we want? One person writes about prayer: "Why should I have to pray about the same things day after day, especially since I don't repeat myself to other people about most subjects?"<sup>3</sup> Is the idea that we must constantly pester God until we hear "OK, I give up. I'll give you what you ask for!"

No, I don't believe that's what Jesus was saying. A seventeenth-century rabbi, Leona Medina, explained prayer this way: "If you watch a man out on a boat grab a rope and pull his boat to shore you might think, if you were confused about weight and motion, that he was really pulling the shore to his boat. People have much the same confusion about spiritual weight and motion: In prayer, some believe that you are pulling God closer to you. But in fact the heartfelt prayer pulls you closer to God."<sup>4</sup>

It is not that we must keep telling God over and over what it is that we need or want. In Matthew 6, Jesus tells us that God knows what we need before we even ask. *Of course*, God knows

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl\\_display.asp?installment\\_id=93040761](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040761)

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters* (HarperOne, 2008), 142

it! Then, why are we to be persistent in prayer? It is to use that rope to pull ourselves closer to God.

There is a story of a man who was told by God that there was work for him to do, and it was to push against a large rock with all of his might. He did this faithfully for years on end, toiling from sun up to sun down against the cold, massive surface of the unmoving rock. He began to feel that his work was in vain, and thoughts of how futile the task was kept him discouraged and disheartened. He went to God in prayer, saying “I have laboured long and hard in your service, putting all my strength to do that which you have asked. Yet, after all this time, I have not even budged that rock a half a millimeter. What is wrong? Why am I failing?” The Lord responded compassionately, “My child, when long ago I asked you to serve me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move it. Your task was to push. And now you come to me, your strength spent, thinking that you have failed. Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled, your back sinewed and brown, your hands are callused from constant pressure, and your legs have become massive and hard. Through opposition, you have grown much and your abilities now surpass that which you used to have. True, you haven't moved the rock, but your calling was to be obedient and to push and to exercise your faith and trust in My wisdom. This you have done. I, my child, will now move the rock.”<sup>5</sup>

When we go to God with persistent prayer, we are gaining in strength, we are attuning our hearts to God’s heart, we are persistently seeking the kingdom of God, we are pulling that rope to become closer and closer to God. Persistent prayer is not about asking God for luxury items. It is not about fulfilling all of our worldly desires. It is about seeking those things which God wants for us.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://bible.org/illustration/unmoved-rock>

Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, and he responded with a version of what we pray here every week, known as The Lord's Prayer (or, the "Our Father" if you are Catholic). It is this introduction to the passage about asking, searching, and knocking which clues us in to the full meaning. Seminary professor Matthew Skinner writes, "Detached from Jesus' prayer, verses 5–13 might seem to offer empty promises, blithely suggesting that God dispenses favors and blessings like a vending machine. Christians should not pray to get whatever they want. They should pray for God to bring the fullness of God's reign to fruition."<sup>6</sup>

In the prayer of our Lord, we speak of basic human needs: sustenance, relationships with others, and relationship with God. The prayer of our Lord teaches us to pray for daily bread. It teaches us to pray for forgiveness of sins, as we forgive others. It teaches us to pray that God's kingdom will come. Other versions say "Set the world right" and "Bring in your kingdom" and "Send your kingdom soon." *This* is what we pray for; *this* is what Jesus directs us to be persistent about in our asking, searching, and knocking.

And Jesus says "how much more will the Heavenly Father give." Perhaps it's another story from Jesus which best illustrates the idea of "how much more." Jesus uses this argument in the well-known passage of Matthew 6, telling us we should not worry about life, what we will eat or drink, or about what we will wear. He says that the birds of the air do not sow nor reap nor gather into barns, but God feeds them. Likewise, God grows beautiful lilies of the field, though they neither toil nor spin. "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not *much more* clothe you?" Jesus asks.

How much more? How much more will God give us of God's self, Spirit, wisdom, guidance, and love? All that we have need of. Each time we call out "How much more?" God responds with that much more. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, page 291.