

## Sermon by the Rev. Christopher D. Girata

Luke 11:1-13  
(Proper 12 – Year C)  
25 July 2010

There once was a little girl who lived on a street right next to a cemetery. Now, the little girl's school was directly on the other side of that cemetery. That cemetery frightened all the other children who lived on her street. In fact, the other children took great pains to avoid the cemetery, walking all the way around the cemetery to get to the school, and then all the way around the cemetery to come home.

But our little girl was not afraid. Every morning she would just head straight through the cemetery to school, and at the end of the day she would walk back, straight through, to come home, usually whistling all the way.

An elderly neighbor sat on her porch each day and watched in amazement as this little girl went whistling through the cemetery each day. One afternoon, she called the little girl over as she returned from school and said to her, "My little friend, I notice that every day, all the children on our block walk around the cemetery to go to school and back, but you just walk right through. How can you do that? Doesn't the cemetery frighten you?" The little girl replied, "Why, no. I'm not frightened, because I'm only passing through."<sup>1</sup>

There is a streak of independence in all of us. Some of us have a more *well-developed* sense of independence than others, but from the moment we pull away from our parents as toddlers and begin to take our first steps all on our own, we begin to work towards autonomy – we begin to strive for the freedom to do what we want, when we want, and how we want.

Autonomy, by definition, means the independence to govern one's self. In other words, being autonomous implies a separation that naturally leads to individualism. To be truly independent – to be truly autonomous – means we cannot be connected to or dependent on one another. Autonomy means that we stand separately from one another, that we are, in essence, disconnected.

Our desire to be self-sufficient comes from a very deep place inside of us – the desire for autonomy is in the very nature of our being. Even our own biblical stories point toward our deep desire to think and

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a sermon by the Rev. Steve Kelsey.

act independently. From Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit to Peter denying Jesus after his arrest, our biblical story is filled with examples of our independent streak getting the best of us. And the worst thing is that our striving for independence is fundamentally pushing us away from one another and from God.

Because autonomy is defined by our disconnection, any time we build a relationship with another person, we are, at the very base level, giving up some of our independence. The irony is that our self-awareness typically comes from our connectedness. We know that in almost every conceivable way, we define ourselves in relation to others. Almost every evaluative experience we have is in reference to others. When we do something well, we are actually just doing that thing better than someone else. When we excel in our jobs or win a competition, that success is in relation to how our peers have performed. The way we define ourselves is through connection, but that flies directly in the face of our natural desire to be independent. No wonder we regularly feel stressed or anxious or nervous or restless – how we understand who we are is based on our connectedness, yet who often strive to be is defined by our *disconnectedness*!

This confusion makes me very sympathetic to the disciple in today's Gospel lesson who said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." That disciple was keenly aware of his own desire for autonomy and independence, yet Jesus was teaching him that living in deeper connection with others and with God is our ultimate goal. When that disciple said, "Lord, teach us to pray," I imagine he was searching for a way to remain independent *and* live in a deeper connection with God.

Jesus knew that his disciples were making a plea to learn how to become more deeply connected with God. Jesus knew that his disciples were wrestling with their imperfectly human desire for autonomy and their perfectly divine desire to be fully connected to God. And so Jesus taught them how to pray. Jesus taught them how to pray a prayer that we know very well. But tonight, I want you to think of that prayer in a new way. I want you to understand this prayer –to deeply feel the reality of a prayer that we know so well we too often skip right over the words.

When we pray, "Give us each day our daily bread," "forgive us our sins," and "do not bring us to the time of trial," we are asking God for help. Jesus is really teaching us how to ask for help.

There are many unique experiences I have as a priest for which I am very thankful, but one kind of experience does not fall into that category – when people approach me in public and ask for money. Hardly a day goes by when I am dressed in my collar that I am not approached by someone on the sidewalk or in a store who asks me to give them money for one thing or another. Many times, people

share heartbreaking stories of sickness or loss, and sometimes they simply ask for money for food. Each time someone asks me for money, I get very uncomfortable. I have always been uncomfortable when a stranger asks me for money in public, with or without a collar on. I imagine that you've all found yourself in a similar situation when you've been asked for money in public, and some of you may also be uncomfortable about being asked. For years, I wasn't sure why this exchange made me so uncomfortable – shouldn't I feel blessed to be in the position to help those who need help the most?

Then one day I realized why I was uncomfortable – my discomfort had nothing to do with being asked for money, my discomfort had everything to do with my identification with the person asking for money. Certainly many of us can imagine a circumstance in which we might find ourselves in financial desperation, but more fundamentally, I didn't like the idea that I might need to ask others for real help. Money is just an easy way of quantifying the need for help. More generally, the idea that I would be in a position where I found myself completely dependent on the aid of others – aid of any kind – puts knots in my stomach. I like my independence. I hope never to be in the situation where I *need* help from someone else... which brings me back to Jesus' prayer.

When Jesus teaches us to pray, Jesus is really teaching us to ask for help. When Jesus teaches us to pray, Jesus is really teaching us that connection is better than disconnection – that relationship is better than autonomy.

We are all in relationship with someone. Consider your favorite relationship. Consider the relationship in your life that feeds and sustains you most of all. Now imagine you needed something from them that would mean the difference between life and death – would you ask? And if you would ask them for their help, would they help you completely? Would they offer you unconditional support? What Jesus says to us today is that even the most complete human relationship, the best human relationship we can have, is never as good as our relationship with God. Even our most perfect human relationship falls short of our most perfect divine relationship with God – and the best part is that *God wants to help us*. God wants to help us do what we are unable to do on our own. God wants to fill in the gaping holes of our independence and make us whole in Him.

Later in this service we will pray the prayer Jesus taught us. This time, when you pray the prayer, say the words carefully, but go beneath the words. Think of how God alone can help you. As difficult as it may be, think of all the ways in which you need God's help – and ask! Don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't just pass through this service without asking for the help you need. Don't just pass through your life, whistling all the way, when God is desperately trying to be in deep relationship with you. God wants to help you. God wants to love you. All you have to do... is ask.