Hang in There!
A Sermon by The Rev. Winston W. Welty

Loving God, we give thanks for the inheritance of your holy Word, by which
you speak to us still. Grant now, that through the words of my mouth and the
meditations of our hearts, we may know the Love and grace of Jesus Christ,
your living Word made flesh among us. Amen.

Today we heard Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. The disciples had seen
how important prayer was to Jesus, and how effective His prayers were, so they
came to Him and said, “Lord, teach us to pray.” In a way it was a strange request;
these were pious Jews who already prayed several times a day, so I think they were
asking about more than technique. In response, Jesus gave them the prayer, a
version of which we still say week after week, day after day. I was tempted just to
focus on the prayer, because it’s a powerful prayer and covers all we need to know
about praying. It helps us understand the difference between our wants and our real
needs. And it’s an easy sermon.

But the thing is, when He finished giving us that model prayer, Jesus wasn’t
finished teaching us about prayer. He followed up with a parable, and I’m
convinced He had in mind that wonderful story we just heard from Genesis, of
Abraham arguing with God, pestering God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.
Jesus’ parable tells of a guy, traveling late in the afternoon to avoid the blazing
heat of the day, who arrives at his friend’s house sometime around midnight. Now
in that culture you always fed your guests when they arrived; you wouldn’t think of
just sending them to bed. But to his horror the host finds his cupboard bare. What’s he to do? Well, he knows his neighbor has plenty of bread, so even though it’s midnight he bangs on his neighbor’s door. From inside he hears a voice say, “Who is it?” And through the closed door he tells his neighbor he needs three loaves for his just-arrived guest. You can imagine the response; the expletive is deleted.

Picture the scene. The home is one room with two levels. At night, to guard against theft and predators, they gather all the animals into the lower level of that one room. The upper level is where the family sleeps, just a little bit above the level of the animals. Most families had lots of children and the arrangement was: the animals on the lower level closest to the door, then on the upper level the several children, then the wife, then the man. He tells the neighbor to go away, it’s the middle of the night. He didn’t want to wake the animals or his family; nobody would get any sleep for the rest of the night. You’d think that would settle it. But no, the man keeps knocking. He’s going to wake up everybody, so the man of the house stumbles around in the dark, finds the loaves, tries to step over his wife and Sallie and Junior and little Suzie and Bobby; hopefully he won’t wake the animals. He cracks the door so the animals won’t get out, gives the man the bread and growls, “Go.” And Jesus says:

“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.”
If the man hadn’t kept knocking he never would have gotten the bread.

Why did Jesus follow the Lord’s Prayer with this story? This parable bothers me. It seems to say if we nag long enough God will finally give in, like I used to do with my children. Is that what Jesus is saying? I don’t think so. The key word to understanding this story is the word, persistence. “Because of his persistence he will get up and give” his neighbor the bread; because he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Persistence was a real problem for the early Church. The problem they faced week after week was apostasy—falling away, people who started and couldn’t continue. It was understandable: to be a Christian was a hard business in the Roman world. Every citizen including slaves had to go and stand before a public statue of Caesar and say: “Caesar is Lord.” And when these Christians would shake their heads and say, “No, Jesus is Lord” they lost jobs, got hounded out of town if they were lucky, and crucified if they weren’t. Many of them dropped out along the way. Speaking of one of his converts, Paul would say, “Demas…has deserted me and gone back to Thessalonica.” It happened again and again.

Am I rambling? What does persistence have to do with prayer? Everything. Prayer’s not just what we say—it’s also what we do. The old adage fits: What you do speaks so loudly I can’t hear a word you say. Prayer is what we do. I love the
way St. Francis was reported to have put it: Pray without ceasing—when necessary use words.

Our problem is, we think we have to bow our heads, close our eyes and say some properly religious words to God. Maybe, maybe not. I once visited a close friend when we both knew his days were numbered. It was a good visit, but it was heavy as he talked about how hard it would be to leave his wife and grandchildren and not be able to see them grow up. We talked about trips we each had taken, about birthday celebrations and vacations at the shore. As I left I told him, “I’m not going to pray; I’m afraid I’d just break up and couldn’t get through it. But I think what we’ve done today is a prayer.” Sometimes prayer really is what you do.

A colleague of mine when he was a child once said to his mother, “Mama, when I go to the revivals the preachers are always talking about their sainted mothers and how they always found them down on their knees—by the bed, out in the corn crib or in the kitchen—everywhere, always praying. I’ve never seen you do that.” And his mother said, “Son with children like mine you have to pray as you go.” There are a lot of ways to knock on the prayer door with actions as well as words. We may have to pray as we go—but we have to keep at it.

I’m not discounting what we do here. To worship is to pray. Ritual is very much a part of Christian faith. We get up, put our Sunday clothes on and come to Church week after week; it’s one of the most important things we do. But God may
not come to Church every Sunday. Some Sundays God stays home in pajamas, reads the New York Times and drinks coffee. I don’t know if God watches Joel Osteen or not. But even if God doesn’t come to Church every Sunday, we need to be here. Because once in a while, when we least expect it, God will come through those doors back there, walk up and down the aisle and stop at your chair or mine. And when that happens, we’ll never ever be the same again. So we need to be here every Sunday just in case God decides to stop by.

You see what I’m saying? This is prayer, too, this getting up and coming here week after week. It’s prayer in action when you come knowing that God may speak to you just when you least expect it. Knocking on the door, persistent; that’s prayer, too.

But in our culture who needs to keep knocking on the door? We don’t have time for that. So we have instant coffee and instant potatoes and microwave meals and canned biscuits. And we can learn Spanish in six easy lessons, grow hair or eyelashes in a matter of days, lose twenty pounds overnight, and even look like Joan Rivers if we have the money or the inclination. No persistence needed, just a little cash and a few minutes or a few days; instant everything.

And Jesus tells this strange story at the end of the Lord’s Prayer about a man who pounds on his neighbor’s door at midnight and won’t take no for an answer. And we’re all in that same boat. It gets downright scary sometimes. We don’t know
where the world’s going, or even where we’re going. The pressures are everywhere, and sometimes we wonder if our little efforts really matter. The needs are so enormous. We read about an oil spill and wonder what in the world we can do, go down there with our buckets? We think about the Taliban or suicide bombers and wonder about the future. We look at drug trafficking, or the rage and incivility of politics, or the boys and girls who come home in flag-draped boxes week after week. And our hearts just sink.

Can our efforts—our knocking on the door make a difference? Mother Teresa was interviewed one day and asked, “Mother, why do you do what you do? You pick up a child and it’s already dead. You pick up another and another and another and try to help. But out on the streets of Calcutta are hundreds and hundreds more. Why do you do what you do?” And she looked at him with those piercing eyes and said, “I do what I can where I am with what I have.” If that’s not prayer I don’t know what it is. We’re not responsible for the whole world; that’s God’s business. But we are responsible for this little family and this little half-acre and this little Church, and the little ones we touch in the grocery store and pass on the streets. Like Mother Teresa we’re to do what we can where we are with what we have. That’s prayer and that’s persistence. Knocking on the door.

The old Celtic storytellers used to begin a story by saying, “Now it may not have happened just like this, but this is a true story.” So let me tell you a story like
that. It’s just a story; you can decide for yourself if it’s true or not. The last time Mary was out of town I got up early one morning, took a long walk, then showered and drove over to Casa del Waffle. I was feeling virtuous after my walk and decided a few carbs wouldn’t hurt, so I ordered an omelet with bacon, hash-browns, whole-wheat toast, coffee and orange juice. The place was crowded, and as I waited for breakfast a woman came and sat down next to me. Strange looking woman: bright red-hair, sort of stringy; wearing a flowery dress and a hat of all things, covered with flowers; lots of make-up and long green gloves and red very high heels. “You don’t mind if I share the table do you?” What could I say? “No, I don’t mind.” “What’s your name?” she asked. And I said, “Winston.” “My name’s Gabriella,” she said; I figured she was Italian. “What do you do?” she asked. I didn’t want to tell her because when you say you’re a priest people either act like you have bad breath, or else they get this wild look in their eyes and you know you’re in for a very long story. So I mumbled, “I’m retired.” That didn’t seem to matter. She said, “I’m a messenger.” “A messenger.” “Yes,” she said, “a messenger, and I’ve been sent to give you a message.” “Who asked you to give me a message?” “She did,” she said. “She?” “Yeah, She; you know, God.” And in my most ministerial voice I said, “God is not a She.” Gabriella shrugged and said, “Whatever.” I thought I must be losing my mind. “Well, if you’re a messenger, what’s the message you have from, uh, Her?” Gabriella said, “Hang in there.”
“What?” I asked. “Hang in there is the message.” And I said, “What kind of a message is that?” Gabriella said, “I don’t know, I’m just a messenger; I guess you have to figure it out for yourself.” Then without a word she got up, left the table, walked out, and got into her old car, just as my omelet arrived. Now it may not have happened just that way, but that’s a true story.

I can’t get that message out of my mind. “Hang in there.” That’s what Jesus is talking about in this story. Hang in there. You who are barely hanging on by your fingernails. You who wonder if you will lose your home or your health or your marriage. Hang in there even with a bad lab report or a back that won’t quit hurting. Hang in there at an age when everything seems hard. I really think that’s what Jesus had in mind when He told this story, for disciples then and now, you and me and all of us: Hang in there. Hang in there. Hang in there. I think that may be prayer after all.