

"Someone's Knocking at the Door"

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Then he said, "Imagine what would happen if you went to a friend in the middle of the night and said, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread. An old friend traveling through just showed up, and I don't have a thing on hand.'"

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived and I have nothing to set before him.'"

Luke 11:5-6

A Knock at Midnight

My sisters and brothers, I greet you this morning, in this holy place, in the name of our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Some years ago, it was well past midnight when my wife and I awoke to the sound of knocking at the front door. The constant knocking summoned us to get out of bed, but before we could do anything, the knocking stopped. I sensed that perhaps there was trouble in the air, because it was well past midnight. We soon learned that the knocking was a neighbor whose house was on fire. First he knocked at the door of his immediate next door neighbor; so not getting a quick response, he went to the next house, our house, and then back to the first neighbor. He kept knocking until finally he got an answer, and a telephone call brought the fire department.

The knock sounded the alarm that there was a crisis. The house was heavily damaged by the fire. But more tragically, one family member later died because of his severe burns suffered in the fire. It was still midnight in the lives of the surviving family members.

Our parable is about the resultant power of perseverance in prayer. On the other hand, there is another important human dynamic couched in the text. Let us unpack the story and gain entrance into one of life's realities. We observe that it is midnight. There is a knock at the door. A man goes to the familiar home of a friend, knocks at the door, and the friend at first will not answer the door. It will take persistence to get an answer at the door,

especially at midnight. The man wants his friend to let him borrow three loaves of bread, because one of his friends has stopped by unexpectedly, and he has no food to set before him.

This man desires to practice hospitality in his own home, so he goes in search of bread; but it is midnight. He wants to share some food with his friend, who is no doubt tired and weary from his journey. The man's friend did not want to get up, because he did not want to be bothered, even by his friend. The man only asked for three loaves of bread. The three loaves of bread would be enough to feed his friend with perhaps some left over for another meal. The man did not have any bread in his house, but he was certain that his friend would have at least three loaves of bread. He was so certain that there was bread there that he knocked on the door at midnight. Surely his friend would get up out of his bed, even at midnight, and loan him the loaves.

The man did not ask his friend for anything elaborate and expensive. He asked for three loaves of bread. He asked for bread.

Fond memories remain about Mr. and Mrs. Whittington who used to take care of my sister and me for a day during our summer visit with our grandfather. This couple, by all standards, was poor, but they had lots of love. They lived in a very modest home. They were willing to care for us for a day. They were more than willing to share what they had with us. When it was time for a meal they set the table. The delicious meal consisted of flour bread and molasses. We knew that the bread had been made with tender loving care, baked and served with a deep sense of radical hospitality. They shared what they had, bread made with Mrs. Whittington's hands.

In the case of the Prodigal Son, the young man found himself facing the midnight hour. There was no one to give him bread to stem his hunger. In the midst of his personal crisis he got a job feeding a farmer's pigs. He was so hungry that he would have eaten the pods that he was feeding to the pigs. No one gave him anything. He realized that it was midnight in his life, and it was time to get help. He decided to go home to his father, not knowing whether his father would welcome him home. He had no idea that his loving father would prepare a great welcome home banquet for him. Welcome home son; there is plenty of food to eat and this meal has been prepared in your honor. Your midnight is over. The father had faith in his son. He gave

the son an opportunity for a new future with hope and he bathed his prodigal son with his extravagant love.

When the congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim and made their way out of Egypt, they began to complain against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. They lamented that it would have been better to have died in Egypt. They remembered how they had sat by the fleshpots, eating their fill of bread. So they accused Moses of bringing them out in the wilderness to kill them with hunger.

The Lord decided to provide bread from heaven for the Israelites. The instructions to Moses told him that there would be enough bread provided for them each day, enough for that day. God gave them meat to eat in the evening and bread in the morning.

Friends, I can taste my mother's biscuits, even now. When we were growing up, my mother often would make biscuits on a daily basis, some times for breakfast and again for dinner. We never had biscuits left over from breakfast for our dinner. Mom always made fresh bread for each meal.

God gave the Israelites fresh bread on a daily basis, because God loved them and wanted to care for them in their midnight hour. God was providing deliverance from slavery and bondage. For them God was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God provided them with access to the Promised Land -- a future with hope. At that time, however, they were lacking faith in God and unable to comprehend the scope of God's love for them. It was midnight in the lives of the displaced Israelites.

The Midnight Hour

Sisters and brothers, it is midnight in the lives of many persons, and it is midnight in the historical moment of some nations. The late theologian, Carl Michalson, has helped me to understand the concept of a personal midnight when he defines a personal crisis. We can equate the midnight hour to Michalson's crucial situation. A crucial situation is a situation that requires a decision; it is a matter of whether a person will live or die; and, it puts to the test a person's relationship to God.

Some people have their back to the wall; they are down and almost out. In the midst of a personal crisis, folk look for a helping hand. Where and to whom can they turn? Quite often, they will turn to the church in an effort to find illumination and healing. When they come, the church must recognize

that it is midnight in their life. The United Methodist Church must be prepared to respond, because someone's knocking at the door.

Avery and Marsh in their popular hymn, "We Are the Church," remind us that the church is not a building, but the church is a people. We dare not play at church; rather, we must boldly practice the church's ministry. What is the church's ministry?

When there is a knock at midnight, the church must be prepared to respond. It is not the time of day that matters; what matters is the time of crisis in the life of one of God's children. In our parable, the man knocking at midnight wants to borrow three loaves of bread. People come to the church looking for bread. They want a little bread to help them through the night and through the crisis. Martin Luther King Jr. portrayed the church as having three loaves of bread – the bread of faith, the bread of hope and the bread of love.

What is this bread of faith? Hebrews tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen [v. 11:1]. Paul reminds us that we walk by faith, not by sight [2 Corinthians 5:7]. So many people do not have this faith that we all pray for daily. They have little confidence in the future.

What is the bread of hope? Paul has this to say about hope:

And we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, **and character produces hope**, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Romans 5:1-5

What a joy it is to know that our hope rests on Jesus Christ, the solid rock. Without hope there can be no future.

What is the bread of love? It seems that all of God's children want to be loved. God is love, and we are the recipients of God's extraordinary love. Jesus commands us to love God, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Love is at the pinnacle of our God relationship and our human relationships.

What about those folk who have little or no faith? What about women, men and children who have no hope? What about folks who do not have the strength to love? It is midnight, and they come knocking on the doors of our United Methodist Churches in Europe, Africa, the Philippines and the United States. Remember that we are a church that dares to say to the world: “Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors. The people of the United Methodist Church.”

People are dealing with a variety of personal crises: anxiety and fear, guilt and shame, faith and doubt, marriage and divorce, suffering and pain, the prospect of losing their job and unemployment, life and death. But there are other personal crises: health (including HIV/AIDS, malaria), poverty, hunger, homelessness, displacement/refugees, and teenage depression.

Nations are in crisis: Zimbabwe and hyperinflation; Darfur and ethnic cleansing; Darfur’s refugee crisis; child slavery in Africa; the war in Afghanistan; the war in Iraq.

Let us glance back and check up on the parable at the point where the man knocked at his friend’s door and asked for three loaves of bread. The sharp response he got was do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything. Well, wake up church, get up church; there are knocks at the door and folks are asking for bread: the bread of faith, the bread of hope and the bread of love.

Keep the Bread Fresh

On one occasion Jesus taught the disciples that the real bread comes from God. Some people talked about the bread from heaven that Moses gave to his people. Jesus told them that he was the bread of life. This is the bread that people and nations need at midnight, because folks who come to Jesus will never be hungry and his believers will never be thirsty (John 6:35, 36).

John Wesley had a passion for the Gospel and he urged his preachers always to offer Christ to the people. So, Wesley could be found preaching in a variety of places, including the churches, the coal fields and the open fields.

When men, women and children knock on the doors of the church, they are looking for bread, fresh bread. They want to encounter a vibrant faith. They want to embrace hope for tomorrow. They want to experience extravagant love that includes them. The church cannot afford to offer stale bread, only

fresh bread. We must keep the bread fresh. If we do not want to eat stale bread for a meal, why would the church offer stale bread to feed the soul? How do we keep the bread fresh?

Wesley espoused a ministry of reaching out and forming disciples through small group ministries. He urged every Methodist to follow the General Rules: Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God (attending upon all the ordinances of God). Living by the General Rules will help those of us in the church to keep the bread fresh for those persons who knock at midnight.

As we strive to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, we must lift up Christ; yes, give them Christ. I believe that God's world is hungry for the Living Bread. D. T. Niles said, "Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." So we must share the Living Bread, and we must keep the bread fresh. We keep the bread fresh by remembering Alfred Ackley's words: "I serve a risen Savior; he's in the world today." We know that Jesus lives because he lives in our hearts.

Living as Jesus' pilgrim disciples is a sign of fresh bread. We keep the bread fresh through our participation in a devout prayer life, regular Bible study, worship opportunities, small group experiences, fellowship and Christian education. From a spiritual point of view we need fresh bread daily. Transformed lives will assist in the transformation of God's world. We must respond to the midnight hour in the lives of people and nations. We are The United Methodist Church, and we strive to facilitate courage for the soul, remembering the words of Charles Tindley:

Courage my soul, and let us journey on.
Tho' the night is dark, it won't be very long.
Thanks be to God, the morning light appears.
And the storm is passing over. Hallelujah!

It is a new day, and each new day requires fresh bread, especially when you are passing through the storms of life.

When The United Methodist Church established Africa University, it began to provide the bread of education for African students. When the UMC responded to the UMCOR Katrina appeal and the Bishops' Katrina appeal, it provided the bread of hope for thousands of displaced people. When the UMC joined the Nothing but Nets campaign it began to provide the bread of survival to thousands of children and adults. When the UMC established the

Global AIDS Fund, we began to provide the bread of love and compassion for those who are suffering and dying.

The people of the United Methodist Church must offer the “bread of life” and it comes in three main varieties -- faith, hope and love. Sisters and brothers, keep the bread fresh! Someone’s knocking at the door. Keep the bread fresh!

Keep the bread fresh as we seek to develop new leaders for the church and the world.

Keep the bread fresh as we strive to reach new disciples of Jesus Christ by starting new congregations and renewing existing congregations.

Keep the bread fresh as we boldly engage in ministry with the poor.

Keep the bread fresh as we partner in ministries to stamp out killer diseases by improving world health.

SO BE IT!

