

Sunday, July 28, 2013: Luke 11:1-13

by [Rhonda Mawhood Lee](#) in the [July 24, 2013](#) issue

I was walking home when Vicki ran up to me. Vicki and I had become acquainted over the last few months because I regularly walked past her hangout in Old Louisville. The intersection was anchored by a Chinese restaurant, a liquor store, a pharmacy and a bus stop and flanked by low-income housing developments. I lived near the downtown church where I served as priest. As one of the few middle-class people who walked through the area, I was often asked for money or bus tickets.

Vicki asked me for money too. A tiny woman with close-cropped hair and huge brown eyes, she radiated intensity. I didn't respond directly to her request but gestured toward the Chinese restaurant: "I haven't had lunch yet. Would you like to join me?" Vicki explained that she wasn't welcome inside the restaurant, so we sat outside on a retaining wall and ate from take-out containers. When Vicki discovered that I was a priest, she exclaimed, "For real?" and grabbed my hands and asked me to pray with her. She closed her eyes as I blessed her with the sign of the cross on her forehead, then she dashed across the street.

Once a week or so Vicki and I ate lunch together, had coffee or just talked. I might give her a bus ticket or a little cash. I never learned where she lived, and she didn't ask where I lived. The one constant in our relationship was prayer. Each time we met, we held hands, bowed our heads and shared our needs and our thanks with God.

The last time I saw Vicki was on a late winter night. She found me on the street and asked, "Rhonda, will you pray with me?" Her need seemed more urgent than usual, so I asked, "Is there something in particular?" "No, just pray for me. Pray for me," she repeated as she took my hands in hers. When I finished she echoed my "Amen" and darted away.

I never found out what happened to Vicki, but she disappeared from my daily route, and when my husband and I moved to Durham, North Carolina, I had to give up trying to find out where she'd gone. The only thing I could do was pray for her, and I have done that daily for several years now. Whether or not Vicki is still a resident of

this world, she taught me that we are sisters in Christ bound together by prayer, trusting in God's love to lead us through danger into the divine embrace.

When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray, he gave them a simple outline: praise God, ask for what you need and pray to participate in God's reign by accepting and offering forgiveness, risking openness to others as God in Christ risked everything for us. Then Jesus elaborated on the need to *persist*. Ask, he tells us. Search. Knock. Be the annoying person who rouses her friend in the middle of the night so that an unexpected guest can be shown hospitality. Be the innocent child who looks to his father to meet his need, whether for food, a clean diaper or a hug. Risk trusting others, because you believe you can trust God. By practicing persistence you will have learned to pray. Ask over and over for what you need, and thank God for the gifts you've received. You'll deepen your intimacy with God and realize your utter dependence on God. Then the prayer that's at the heart of all prayers will be answered: you'll know yourself loved by the One who created, redeemed and sustains all creatures.

My prayers with Vicki prepared me for my next parish in Durham. Divided by conflicts over sexuality, St. Joseph's Episcopal Church had been reduced to about a dozen worshiping members. Those few were faithful: week after week they showed up for worship and Bible study. When one member asked for permission to start a daily service of morning prayer, I asked that they keep the doors open as they prayed so that visitors might be encouraged to stop in. Soon we added evening prayer to the calendar and placed a sign outside advertising the services. Visitors appeared to join us in prayer: members of other parishes, workers at nearby Duke Hospital and seekers who didn't feel comfortable in church on Sunday mornings. They mingled their intercessions and thanksgivings, weeping and rejoicing, helping each other practice the persistence that Jesus taught.

Then the parish gained some new teachers in the art of persistence. Some of the homeless men who regularly gathered on the church's grounds came inside to participate in the daily prayers; others came to ask for assistance, a listening ear or access to the bathroom. Relationships developed. When one homeless friend went missing, church members searched until they found him at a psychiatric facility north of town. They visited him and brought him back to Durham when his treatment was completed. Now he lives in an intentional community with other formerly homeless men and some church members who have never been homeless.

Prayers were raised and prayers were answered, often in ways that our congregation could not have anticipated.

I sometimes wonder if I should have persisted in searching for Vicki when she disappeared. I hope she is safe; I hope that the power of Jesus has vanquished whatever demons pursued her. I hope that whatever relationships may have been destroyed in her life have been repaired. I will always give thanks for her. Through her openness to me, her trust in God and her boldness in asking for what she needed, Vicki taught me to persist in praying.