

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 29, 2001

Ask, Search, Knock

Luke 11: 1-13

I imagine it was early morning,
and the disciples were gathered in a certain place,
when Jesus returns to them.

He's been praying, and as he walks into their midst,
there is a sense God's Holy Presence emanating from his body.
In his eyes they can see God's compassion,
in his voice, God's strength,
in his walk, there is a confidence that God's purposes
are being worked out.

We can only imagine what these disciples perceive in Jesus
when he returns from prayer
but whatever it is, it evokes in them a deep yearning –
a longing of heir spirits
to have what Jesus has.

Only one other person in their experience had ever come close
to this kind of spiritual depth.
John the Baptist had been the first to stir up in them
this longing for God,
this calling to be used in the work of God's kingdom.

And now Jesus has captured their enthusiasm with his charisma,
captured their dreams with his vision of God's kingdom,
he has satisfied their hunger with the richness of his Spirit,
and whatever it is that he has,
the disciples want more of it.

Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.

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The prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples is
as simple as it is direct.
There is nothing elaborate about it, nothing very formal.
Just a quick but certain acknowledgment of
God's fatherly goodness, and God's holiness;
Then a series of imperatives,
Your kingdom come

*Give us each day our daily bread
Forgive our sins
Do not bring us to the time of trial...
Come... Give... Forgive... Do not bring us to trial...*

Imperatives – not cautious requests, but insistence and demand, imperative.
Like so many prayers of the Old Testament,
Jesus teaches his disciples to insist that God keep God's promises.
Prayer is as simple as asking, seeking, and knocking,
and expecting God to do what God has said God would do.

Still, you know as well as I do that prayer is not always so simple.
I know a man who had lived as faithful a life as anyone,
He had served as a deacon and an elder in his church,
had given generously of his income to support the church,
had kept his family in church every Sunday,
and then at age 50 the man was laid off from his job
by the company where he'd worked for 14 years.

For the next 5 years of his life he went without a steady job.
He asked, and he searched, and he knocked
until his throat was sore, his eyes were tired,
and his knuckles were bruised and bloody.
And he wondered, what's the use in all this asking and knocking
when God remains silent behind a locked door
and won't come out to meet me.

I suspect that the disciples' yearning to have what Jesus has is,
in part, a result of their dissatisfaction,
their frustration with their own prayer life.
Too many times they had prayed to God, asking for what they needed
only to find themselves standing, unmoved, in the face of God's silence.
Too many times they had searched after answers to their dilemmas
the struggle of their families
only to wind up at another dead end.
Too many times they had knocked at closed doors,
hoping to discover God's purpose, God's blessing on the other side
only to walk away with bloody knuckles.

I imagine there is a deep agony, drawing near to despair,
behind the disciples' request,
Lord, teach us to pray.

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So Jesus teaches his disciples this simple, un-elaborate prayer.
And then he tells them a story.

Suppose you've just had a friend arrive at your house
and you have nothing to feed him.
So you go to your neighbor at midnight and ask for 3 loaves of bread.
But your neighbor says, "Go away and stop bothering me.
It's too late. You're going to wake up the kids,
and I'm not going to give you anything."
But you persist – you refuse to go away,
and finally out of sheer irritation, your neighbor gives in,
gets up and gives you what you need.

So, Jesus says, it's simple:

Ask, and it will be given you;

search, and you will find;

knock, and the door will be opened for you.

And why? Because God is not a disinterested, uncaring neighbor.

God is our Father, and we are God's children.

And unlike the uncaring neighbor, God wants what is good for us.

This faith in God's goodness is the foundation of every act of prayer.

Choose to believe it or not,

faith in God's goodness is the most fundamental element

of the Christian spiritual life,

it stands at the center of Jesus prayer life

and the prayer he teaches his disciples:

God is a father who loves his children and gives good gifts to them.

If even an insensitive neighbor will give you what you need

when you bother him enough,

how much more will your heavenly Father give you what is good,

if you only ask.

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Well, that's not exactly the way Jesus said it.

Jesus doesn't leave God's good gift unidentified,

allowing us to fill in the blank with whatever strikes our fancy.

A new car, a big pay raise, a months vacation to Hawaii.

He doesn't even leave it open for other more worthy requests:

a job for the jobless,

a child for the childless,

a cure for the dying.

No, Jesus redefines our needs,

...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

God knows we have many needs, and God cares about them all.

But first, God's goodness satisfies our deepest need. Our essential need,

the need for a right relationship with God,

and a right relationship with others.

Communion with God
and Community with others –
this is God's answer to our prayer
this is God's good gift to us
when we pray as Jesus taught the disciples.

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The man I know who lost his job found one again, but not until five years later.
He has still not made up for the financial loss of being out of work for 5 years,
and he probably never will.
But the struggle of those five years gifted him with a greater gain.
Those five years drove him to his knees in prayer
more than ever before in his life.
In those five years he learned to lean on the grace of God
and he found that God's grace is sufficient to sustain him
through the worst of times.
Perhaps that's a gift that's good enough
to be worth 5 years wages.

Jesus says, the answer to our asking, our searching, our knocking
is the good gift of the Holy Spirit who will draw us
into the presence of God.
For in the very act of asking, searching, knocking,
in the bowing of our heads,
in the descent to our knees,
in the clasping of our hands together in prayer,
...God's kingdom begins to take shape in our midst,
...and we find our daily bread provided,
...and we discover that the radical and liberating act of forgiveness is possible,
...and we find a way out, a way of escape from the temptation
that lurks before us,
because when we pray, the Spirit of God is with us.

And having the Holy Spirit of God
we will have all that we need,
even if one day the answer to our prayers is a crucifixion.

You see, you have to remember
that Jesus gives these instructions to his disciples
as he is making his way toward Jerusalem
toward the cross on which he will die.

This One who says, "Ask and it will be given to you,"
is the One who one day will fall to his knees on the Mount of Olives
and clasp his hands in prayer
and ask God to let pass his cup of suffering.
And in that garden, the heavenly Father will not give him what he asks,

but instead will send an angel to give him strength,
strength to endure the anguish he must face.

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Whatever you are praying for,
whatever beautiful dream you long to reach,
whatever hellish nightmare you plead to avoid,
pray with the confidence of Jesus,
that the Father in heaven longs to give you good gifts,
and is waiting to impart the gift of all gifts
his own love
his own almighty presence in your life.

Whatever you are praying for,
Ask for it, Search for it, Knock for it...in the knowledge of this good news...
and it will be given to you
you will find it – and more –
for in your prayer, the door to the kingdom
will be opened to you.

Amen.