

SERMON: Good Gifts
TEXT: Luke 11:1-13

Many of you will remember the old TV game show called “Let’s Make a Deal.” Monty Hall was the host and he would go into the audience where everyone was dressed in a silly costume. He would offer people money, say \$50, and they had a choice to either take the 50 or choose a door. There were three doors, which the lovely Carol Merrill would present, and behind these doors were prizes. Behind two of the doors would be great prizes worth lots of money, like a new refrigerator, or a fancy boat. But another door would have a dud of a prize, like a real live pig, or a year’s worth of canned Spam. The contestant had to choose between Door Number 1, Door Number 2, or Door Number 3, OR they could trade for an envelope with money in it. The gamble, of course, was that the envelope might have five dollars in it, or the door they chose might have a pig. The rest of the audience would yell about what they thought the contestant should choose. Sometimes the gamble paid off; sometimes not.

Well, where am I going with this little parable? Does Monty Hall represent God, allowing us to choose a path without knowing where it might take us? Or is he the devil, tempting us to want more than we need, to a feeling of

discontentment? Either way, if we take it too far, it's probably a very dangerous parable that illustrates some very bad theology.

But I guess it came to mind because of something Jesus told his disciples about prayer: "Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." The problem that we have with this promise, however, is that what's behind the door isn't always what we asked for.

We've all said prayers which went unanswered; we've all gotten down on our knees and begged for good things still didn't get it. And it's not like we're asking for a boat and getting a bunch of canned fake meat. We're often asking for really important, very reasonable and positive things – like for a child to be healed of cancer, or for a brave soldier to return from war, or for rain in a time of terrible drought. We know, as the Rolling Stones' sang, that "you can't always get what you want" but what's wrong with wanting life rather than death?

I found a poem that might be a little disturbing, as it's about God saying "no."

*I asked God to take away my pain.
God said, "No, it is not for me to take away,
But for you to give up."*

*I asked God to make my handicapped child whole.
God said, "No, her spirit is whole,
Her body is only temporary."*

*I asked God to grant me patience.
God said, "No, patience is a by-product of tribulations;
It isn't granted, it's learned."*

*I asked God to give me happiness.
God said, "No, I give you blessings;
Happiness is up to you."*

*I asked God to spare me pain.
God said, "No, suffering draws you apart from worldly cares
And brings you closer to me."*

*I asked God to make my spirit grow.
God said, "No, you must grow on your own,
But I will prune you to make you fruitful."*

*I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.
God said, "No, I will give you life
So that you may enjoy all things."*

*I asked God to help me love others as much as he loves me.
God said, "Ahhh,
Finally you have the idea."*

I remember a church song from the 70's. It was sort of a campy, youth group kind of song based on this scripture passage: "Seek and ye shall find, knock and the door shall be opened, ask and it shall be given, and the love comes a-

tumblin' down." Yes, it's kind of cheesy – it's from the 70's after all – but it solves the puzzle for me. The answer to prayer is God's love.

No matter what we're seeking, as long as we seek it from God, what we'll find is God's love. No matter whether we choose Door Number 1, Number 2, or Number 3, as long as it's a door in God's kingdom, it will open to us the gift of God's love. No matter what we ask, if we're asking God, we'll be given God's love. "The love comes a-tumblin' down."

Reading on in the passage, we find this to be true. "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give GOOD GIFTS to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Our God is our loving Father, our parent, who doesn't give us everything we ask for. After all, sometimes what we most want is the furthest thing from what we most need. But our Father in heaven will *always* give us his love.

In case you doubt or have trouble seeing God as your loving parent, remember from the beginning of the passage that “Jesus invites his disciples into a deeply personal relationship with God.” According to one theologian, Jesus “[encourages] them to call upon God using the same name he uses -- *Abba, Father*. He invites his disciples to call upon God as children call upon a loving parent, trusting that they belong to God and that God wants for them what is good and life giving.” (Elisabeth Johnson, commentary on Luke 11:1-13, www.workingpreacher.org)

A Presbyterian pastor who writes a regular column was recently writing about prayer. She began by remembering the first prayer she ever prayed; when she was 8 years old, she begged God to help her baby brother who had been taken to the emergency room with a health crisis. Then she addressed our present situation. “Prayer has come under fire as of late. Promises of “thoughts and prayers” feel vapid, condescending, useless. The phrase carries as much heft as “take care” at the end of a conversation, or “have a nice day” from the friendly sales clerk.... The criticism rings valid. But dismissing prayer altogether throws the baby out with the spiritual bath water.... Power, God’s power, accompanies prayer. Thoughts and prayers, when actually thought and prayed, carry the heft of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit speaks, intercedes, accompanies, advocates....

My prayer for my brother revealed to me on that long-ago night the depth of my love for him.... My prayer laid bare the limits of my power and control. My silent cries on behalf of my baby brother unveiled an ownership of the faith I'd previously thought belonged to my parents or the preacher or the adults I'd prayed with week after week in the pew. That prayer, the first one I recall praying unscripted, unsolicited or unprompted, contained a hope to which I continue to cling: There is a God who listens and cares, a God concerned with me and my concerns, a God who acts, even when all I've got are thoughts and prayers." (Jill Duffield, *Prayer*, The Presbyterian Outlook, January 10, 2018)

God's answer to our prayers is love. God gives his whole self as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. "...How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

In the gift of the Holy Spirit there is strength, there is comfort, there is clarity, there is peace. In the gift of the Holy Spirit there is energy, there is inspiration, there is motivation, there is guidance. In the gift of the Holy Spirit, there is the very presence of our Father God who promises to never leave us or forsake us.

Unless you're making deals with the devil, our heavenly Father will answer every door upon which you knock with GOOD GIFTS. So keep asking and know that you *will* receive daily bread, keep searching and believe that you *will* find forgiveness, keep knocking with confidence that the door to God's kingdom *will* be opened... to the glory of God!

AMEN.