

SERMON: Everyone Who Asks Receives?
TEXT: Luke 11:1-13

7-24-22

I was working in my office at the church I served in Iowa, when a stranger came in the door. He was traveling through town on a bicycle, and he was tired and hungry. So I sent him to a local restaurant for their daily special. The churches in town had a standing arrangement with the restaurant, so all I had to do was call and tell them to expect the man. They would then send us the bill. Just a few minutes after he left, the restaurant called me back to say that the man was asking for a steak instead of the daily special, which was chicken. The difference in cost was about five dollars. It doesn't sound like much, but we had only a small amount in the benevolence fund. Plus, we tried to treat everyone equally. I reiterated that we had agreed to pay for the daily special and if he didn't want that, he would have to pay the difference himself.

The man was hungry and we fed him. He didn't get exactly what he wanted, but he got what he needed. I don't know if he

prayed for food, but if he did his prayers were answered. He asked and he received.

I don't know how many other churches this man went to. I don't know how many times he was refused help. But when you're living a transient life, moving from town to town, I imagine you have to be persistent to get your needs met.

When Jesus was teaching his disciples about prayer, he told a story about how persistence pays off. He said, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you." And there are those who would argue that if something is important to you, it's important to God, and we should ask God for whatever we need, no matter how trivial.

One theologian commented, "God wants us to pray. More than that, God wants us to ask for anything. The word many Bibles translate as 'persistent' in Jesus' parable on prayer would actually be better translated as 'shameless.' Our petitions to God,

Jesus says, should be bold, audacious, shameless. Prayer is... perhaps fundamentally – asking God for what we most need and desire...shamelessly.... When we ask God for something in prayer, we acknowledge both our need and God’s goodness.” (David Lose, www.workingpreacher.org, July 18, 2010)

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” These words of Jesus are among the most well-known and memorable verses from the Bible. They have a poetic tone and rhythm, they provide imagery that everyone can relate to, and they share a simple message.

Yet, I know plenty of people – maybe you’re one of them – for whom these words are among the most confusing and frustrating, even heartbreaking verses in the Bible. They don’t ring true. They don’t represent reality. They make us question whether Jesus can really be trusted. For we know that everyone who asks DOES NOT receive, everyone who searches DOES NOT

find, and everyone who knocks DOES NOT have the door opened for them. Many of us have been on our knees and prayed fervently and searched unceasingly, banging our fists on that door – not for trivial things – but in life or death situations. And many of those prayers have gone unanswered.

The same theologian wrote, “Unanswered prayer, in light of these verses, creates a huge crisis of faith. It puts honest believers in a bind between wondering whether God failed or they did. Most of us, believing it unfaithful to fault God, blame ourselves instead. We must not have had enough faith, or we didn’t have a sufficient number of other Christians praying for us, or we just didn’t pray the right way.” (David Lose, www.workingpreacher.org, July 18, 2010)

But remember, even Jesus himself, dripping with blood, sweat, and tears, begged his Father, “Let this cup pass from me.” (Luke 22:42) And his prayer went unanswered.

And yet, Jesus, again, was the one who taught that God does answer our prayers. In verse 13 of chapter 11, the last verse of this passage, Jesus tells us *how* God answers all our prayers. “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!”

Did you catch that? The *Holy Spirit* is the answer to all our prayers. The Holy Spirit provides comfort in our grief, when a loved one dies despite our fervent prayers for healing. The Holy Spirit provides peace when we find ourselves in the midst of chaos and confusion. The Holy Spirit provides guidance and direction when we don't know which way to turn. The Holy Spirit is a loving presence when we have been rejected and abandoned. The Holy Spirit is a companion when we are all alone, giving hope in despair, strength in weakness, inspiration in discouragement, joy in sorrow.

From another Biblical scholar, I read, "If we ask, seek, and knock, Jesus says, we will surely receive and find and the door will be opened for us to the Father's favorite and fundamental gift, which makes possible the prayer's fulfillment: the Holy Spirit....The holy Father wants us to knock and find the Spirit waiting to enliven, feed, and defend us. The point of prayer is not to change God's mind, but to shape ours, to make us fit for the kingdom, ready to live the only life possible in God's household: one of love." (Meda Stamper, www.workingpreacher.org, July 24, 2016)

The Holy Spirit is the gift of God-self, the gift of relationship with a Parent who loves us relentlessly.

Frederick Buechner is a favorite theologian for many, probably because he's so plainspoken and down to earth. Here is what he wrote about prayer. *"Whatever else it may or may not be, prayer is at least talking to yourself, and that's in itself not always a bad idea. Talk to yourself about your own life, about*

what you've done and what you've failed to do and about who you are and who you wish you were and who the people you love are and the people you don't love, too. Talk to yourself about what matters most to you, because if you don't, you may forget what matters most to you. Even if you don't believe anybody's listening, at least you'll be listening.

Believe Somebody is listening. Believe in miracles. That's what Jesus told the father who asked him to heal his epileptic son. Jesus said, 'All things are possible to him who believes.' And the father spoke for all of us when he answered, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.' (Mark 9:14-29)

Buechner continues, "What about when the boy is not healed? When, listened to or not listened to, the prayer goes unanswered? Who knows? Just keep praying, Jesus says....Even if the boy dies, keep on beating the path to God's door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you

call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, [God] will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for.” (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row, 1973)

You know, it’s hard to visit someone after they’ve suffered a great loss, because we can’t fix it. We can’t restore what they’ve lost. We can’t take the pain away. There are no magic words we can say to make it alright. In fact, it is most often better to listen than to speak in such times. It is better just to be there. To be present. To share God’s comfort and love. Like the little boy who climbed up on his grieving neighbor’s lap just days after he’d lost his wife. When his mother asked the boy what he said to the man, he answered, “Nothing. I just helped him cry.”

God listens. God hears. God answers. So ask, seek, knock. Persistently, relentlessly, shamelessly. And you will receive the everlasting presence of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God!
AMEN.