

February 19, 2017

TEXT: Matthew 7:7–11

TITLE: Words from the Mount – Unanswered Questions

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

We hear these words from the Sermon on the Mount, and they wash over us like a warm bath. God is available to us, Jesus assures us. It is as if all we have to do is walk into the next room and we can talk to God face to face. “Ask, seek, knock” Jesus invites, “and you will find success. Just turn to me and you will find what you’re looking for. You will get the answers you are after. You will be welcomed in.”

But frankly we also know that life isn’t always that easy. We could turn to our neighbors in our pew and name prayers we have offered fervently that seem to have gone unanswered. We can lift up moments in our lives and situations in the world where things have seemed well out of control, when we have felt lost or something or someone has felt lost to us. And we have all had moments where God feels light years away, not on the other side of the door, ready to greet us with a smile—but distant, remote, preoccupied.

I’ve shared with you before that my cousin died of a rare form of throat cancer when she was 28 years old. She was a special education teacher, exceptional in her talent and beloved by her students. She was the funniest person I knew. She was loved and she was loving. I could find no consolation in her death or in my grief—except at the very end, that she was not suffering anymore. The greatest comfort came from the knowledge that she knew with clarity as she was dying that Jesus was welcoming her home. But I had asked and asked and asked for her healing—some of you even joined me in praying for her. But she died anyway, in spite of my most ardent prayers.

As easy as Jesus makes this sound, we know from our own experiences that God is not a genie in a lamp granting us every wish we desire. God is not Santa Claus leaving the objects of our desire in stockings or under trees according to a prearranged appointment marked on the calendar. Asking does not always mean we receive—nor should it. (What if our request comes at the expense of another?) Seeking isn’t easy. And sometimes we feel like we have to pound at the door for years before we have a tangible encounter with God.

So what do we make of Jesus’ words?

Well, in spite of this passage not appearing in our lectionary cycle, commentators have many suggestions.

Most commentators think that, as I have suggested, Jesus is talking about prayer. But they are likewise quick to point out that Jesus’ might not be saying what we think during a quick first read.

Commentators agree the claims of Christ sound pretty naïve. One says: “They seem to promise categorically that we can get anything we pray for as long as we pray with sufficient tenacity and intensity...(but, he goes on to say,) the New Testament makes it perfectly clear that prayer is not intended as a means of manipulating God into satisfying our selfish desires.”¹

This commentator points out, as we well know, that unselfish prayers for the needs of others often go unanswered too. And he reminds us that we’re not alone when it comes to having a prayer unanswered or a request delayed.

Paul prayed that a thorn in his flesh would be removed and it stuck around; Jesus prayed for his cup to be lifted in the Garden of Gethsemane and he still headed to the cross.²

So how do we find reassurance or even instruction in these words? How do we dive beneath the surface and get to the heart of Jesus’ message? And how do we find it in our hearts to still pray with trust when we don’t know if things will turn out the way we want them to in the end?

Well, context helps us out a little in this situation. Our passage for this morning comes to us in a pivotal moment toward the end of Jesus’ sermon on the mount. This section serves as a fulcrum, moving us from the “long string of imperatives” that come before and toward the climactic teaching on the Golden Rule. For nearly two chapters Jesus has been teaching his followers to do much that we may find impossible—to forgive enemies, to love those who hate us, to remove the plank in our own eye before pointing out the speck of fault in another. One commentator suggests that Jesus’ teachings in these few verses point us to the one through whom this impossible standard of living is somehow possible.

The source of our strength as strive to live as Christ instructs comes from God, he argues. It is then through the persistent act of asking, seeking, and knocking upon God’s door that we might receive the grace necessary to live into this outlandish and amazing vision of the kingdom of God in our midst. A prayer then, in which we ask, seek and knock will be answered as long as it points us to the larger good—not to egotistical pursuits but to a manifestation of God’s will in our lives and in the world.

More comfort comes when we realize that this passage, too, is about *relationship*. The call to ask, seek, and knock precedes a teaching about the goodness of God and a call to trust in our Maker. Asking, seeking, knocking, then become actions of *faith*, indicators of confidence in the goodness of God. Jesus tells us: Trust that God will not harm you nor forsake you. Trust that God will not ignore your need nor fill your empty plates with stone. Trust that God is good and will do good for those who turn to God. Trust that God

¹ Hare, Douglas. *Matthew: Interpretation Biblical Commentary*. P 78.

² Ibid p 78.

will, in fact, care for you with greater tenderness than a parent cares for his or her own child.

“Asking, seeking and knocking become ways of being in relationship with God.”³ The quality that best defines this relationship is *dependence* on our part and *steadfast love* on the part of God. We turn to God realizing that all we have and all we need comes from God. We notice that God alone possesses the strength we need to face the most challenging trials. We recognize that we do not have it all figured out, and that we need guidance. We recognize that the strength that we possess is not enough to make it through a crisis and that we need help. We recognize that we cannot be everything to all people, and so we seek clarity of purpose and a sense of call.

We realize, over and over again that we need God.

And perhaps we learn that it is not so much the *what* of our asking—the fancy words or tilt of our heads, or even the subject of our prayer. It is more about the *how* of our asking—the humility behind it, the hope behind it, the trust behind it, the desperation behind it, the state of our heart.

We come to God in prayer because we *need* God, and the act of praying is an acknowledgement of our need, and also our belief that God will—in God’s own way and God’s own time—provide.

The invitation to ask, seek, and knock is an invitation to orient ourselves—our hearts, minds, souls and lives—toward God. As we pray, our perspective shift to God’s will. We know that God alone has the long view, and so we pray for God’s will to be done, even as we name the specific concern that keeps us up at night. Someone writes: “Prayer does not teach us what to ask for, but how to ask; prayer reminds us of our place and of our limits; prayer recognizes the difference between human comprehension and God’s vision.”⁴

Bestselling author, Elizabeth Gilbert, writes of her first notable prayerful encounter with God—who she approached as she became increasingly aware that her marriage was dissolving and life as she had known it was coming to an end. She writes of a conversation she had with God as she lay sobbing on her bathroom floor on a cold November night. She writes:

I had finally noticed that I seemed to have reached a state of hopeless and life-threatening despair, and it occurred to me that sometimes people in this state will approach God for help. I think I’d read in a book somewhere.

What I said to God through my gasping sobs was something like this: “Hello God. How are you? I’m Liz. It’s nice to meet you.”

³ Matthew: Feasting on the Gospels; Mark Lomax. P 161.

⁴ Matthew: Feasting on the Gospels; Katherine Bush; p 162.

That's right—I was speaking to the creator of the universe as though we'd just been introduced at a cocktail party. But we work with what we know in this life, and these are the words I always use at the beginning of a relationship. In fact, it was all I could do to stop myself from saying, "I've always been a fan of your work..."

"I'm sorry to bother you so late at night," I continued. "But I'm in serious trouble. And I'm sorry I haven't ever spoken directly to you before, but I do hope I have always expressed ample gratitude for all the blessings that you've given me in my life."

This thought caused me to sob even harder. God waited me out. I pulled myself together enough to go on: "I'm not an expert at praying, as you know. But can you please help me? I am in desperate need of help. I don't know what to do. I need an answer. Please tell me what to do. Please tell me what to do. Please tell me what to do..."⁵

She cried and she cried out until she the crying stopped and she had a voice that clearly said "*Go back to bed, Liz.*"⁶

God's answer was, in many ways, anticlimactic. God didn't tell her what to do about her marriage. God didn't solve the problem right then and there. God didn't erase her pain or fix anything. God told her to get some rest.

But God showed up. God heard her and she knew she wasn't alone. God told her to get rest, and she knew God would give her strength.

God did answer her prayers in an instant, but her approach and God's assured presence was the beginning of a relationship that allowed her to discern God's will; find strength in troubled times; and live into her gifts and call.

This was the start of what she calls a *religious conversation* for her—of a relationship grounded on dependence and decision, a relationship founded in hope and in trust that the God who answered is a God of love and goodness and heard her cries.

This promised relationship is ours too. These five little verses open a whole new world to us.

They open us to the reality that we are not alone—when life is easy or when life is hard, God is with us. They open us to the possibility that God hears us when we cry out, God is available to us in our dependence, God desires for us to draw near. They open us to the possibility, too, that God invites us into God's kingdom vision for the world—to work for the common good, to overcome suffering, to embody love.

⁵ Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Eat Pray Love*. P 15.

⁶ Ibid p 16.

These verses open us to the possibility that God is God. This is good news in a day and an age filled with so much uncertainty: Where it takes some gymnastics to discern if news is fake or real; where backroom legislation and the platforms of cabinet picks continue to disenfranchise the vulnerable; and where daily life still goes on—for us, and for those even more vulnerable throughout the world.

And so whether we are curled up on a bathroom floor in tears or our hearts are filled with joy, the invitation is ours too: draw near to God in prayer. Speak candidly about your concerns; seek the will of God; wait in expectancy for the kingdom of God to bear fruit in our world. Dare to live as a people of faith because God is God, and God is love.

Amen.