

Ask, Seek, Knock
Genesis 18:16-33
Luke 11:1-13

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.”

If you were in worship last Sunday, you know that Brian challenged me to make a public confession about some personal shortcoming—not quite what I think the pulpit is for, but I want to be a sport! So as Brian confessed last week that he is not easy to live with and as Austin confessed her first conscious awareness of her own racism the week before, I will confess before God and all of you that I am not very good at praying. This is a disturbing confession for a minister to make to her congregation. Let me hasten to assure you that I am pretty faithful about praying for you, and pretty relentless about asking God to help us with the mess we have made of the world. I am also well-practiced in offering pastoral prayers of a Sunday morning and prayers of thanksgiving to God for the lives of those who have joined the Church Triumphant, for Jean today. But the disciplined beseeching of God for my own life? The setting aside of time to be holy? Not so much. I remember being on the gurney waiting to be wheeled into surgery a few years ago, thinking that all of you would have known just what to say to God on your own behalf in that moment. I was pretty much tongue-tied, only wordlessly aware of a great trust that, in life and in death, I belonged to God.

“Lord, teach us to pray...” the disciples asked Jesus. According to Luke, Jesus had just finished praying and the disciples must have listened in. Who knows what they heard or saw or sensed in Jesus’ praying that prompted them to ask for his help in their own. We only know that, in response, Jesus first gave them the words. He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” “To learn to pray” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in a book on prayer that caused the Nazis to ban him from ever publishing another, “sounds contradictory to us. Either the heart is so overflowing that it begins to pray by itself, we say, or it will never learn to pray. But this is a dangerous error..., to imagine that it is natural for the heart to pray. We then confuse wishing, hoping, sighing, lamenting, rejoicing—all of which the heart can certainly do on its own—with praying....Praying certainly does not mean simply pouring out one’s heart. It means, rather, finding the way to and speaking with God....No one can do that one one’s own. For that, one needs Jesus.” Jesus first gave them the words, the basic words, the words used by a multitude to start the conversation.

“My dear God,” Flannery O’Connor wrote at age twenty in a prayer journal, “how stupid we people are until You give us something. Even in praying, it is You who have to pray in us....” “Likewise,” Paul wrote to the Romans, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

If you are seeking a tutor for your conversation with God, consider not only the gift of Jesus’ words that we say together every Sunday, but consider borrowing the words of Scripture. Read them; write them on your heart; commit a psalm or two or twenty to memory because they also are the words God gives us, the words God has prayed in people for generation after generation. “Bonhoeffer cited Luther to the effect that the Psalms, once taken to heart and incorporated into a daily program of prayer, make all other prayers seem bloodless.” To wit: Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s dearest friend and biographer, came across the date of Kristallnacht--November 9, 1938--jotted in the margins of Bonhoeffer’s Bible next to Psalm 74, verse 8: “They say to themselves, ‘Let us plunder them.’ They have set afire all the houses of God in the land.” Then exclamations marked the next two verses: “Our signs we do not see; there is no longer a prophet to preach; there is nobody among us who knows how long. How long, O God, shall the foe blaspheme? Shall the enemy revile thy name forever?” These are the traces of Bonhoeffer’s prayers—prayer as human marginalia written in response to God’s word.

Likewise I remember when the phone rang in the middle of the night at my parents’ home in Los Angeles where I was visiting some thirty-two years ago, my colleague calling to inform me that our friend had been assassinated in his presidential office at the American University in Beirut, I went back to bed with no words of my own. Rather I prayed the words of Scripture through my tears: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble; therefore we will not fear. I to the hills will lift mine eyes. From whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Jesus himself prayed these psalms, words given to him, prayed in him by God, even from the cross: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? “The words that come from God,” Bonhoeffer assures us, “will be the steps on which we find our way to God.”

Next, in response to the disciples’ request, Jesus tells a story about an encounter between friends at midnight. Midnight is the hour when we toss and turn because we are ill-prepared for the need of a friend who shows up unannounced on our mind. Or maybe midnight is the hour when an ill-prepared friend intrudes upon our otherwise locked up life. The

context of the story has prompted interpreters to identify God with the less than responsive friend and us with the persistent petitioners. Yet if you continue listening, Jesus piles on the examples of our merely human responses to one another's petitions: a child asking for a fish or an egg. Will you give the child a snake or a scorpion in return? Jesus asks. His point is that if even someone like the grudging friend will get out of bed at midnight to help a friend who does not really deserve help, if a parent will respond to the simple requests of a child for sustenance, how much more, how much more, how much more will God give us...but give us what?

Luke says God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Matthew says God gives good things to those who ask. These gifts are one in the same. Even though we may ask for vengeance, for success, for prosperity, for winning, for miracles to satisfy our longing hearts, one way or another God gives us some manifestation of God's life in our life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, understanding.

Though finally, I do not think the story Jesus tells and the examples he gives are meant to teach us that prayer is what we do in order to get something from God. Jesus' point in all three instances has to do with the relationship our asking joins. What I imagine the disciples overheard in Jesus' prayer was one side of a most intimate relationship, the human side of a life-giving conversation. And yet as Jesus speaks to us in Scripture, we also hear the other side of the conversation: hear God's word addressed to our every weakness. In the constant give and take that they witnessed between Jesus and his heavenly Father, the twelve must have longed to live in the lively trust that faith in the living God is. So Jesus told them to ask and in asking to join the conversation.

That is how it was between Abraham and God, where we are let in on both sides of the conversation: God reminding himself that he cannot act in secret or in isolation from Abraham because God has chosen Abraham and his children to carry the promise; Abraham asking God to be God. This is a relationship; a real relationship; a relationship in which something happens. Like any relationship, there is drama, a plot, characters, dialogue. The Bible is full of stories that invite us to watch what has happened in the past when characters like us ask and seek and knock in response to God's address. In the case of Abraham, when God tells him of the grave inhospitality of Sodom and Abraham anticipates God's plan to destroy the whole city, Abraham asks: "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" Abraham asks "Shall not the Judge of the earth do what is just?" Then Abraham asks on behalf of fifty righteous people, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, ten? At the end of the conversation, God simply goes his way and Abraham returns to his place. God is a spontaneity with whom we can and may discuss and even argue the matter.

"If the world were a cosmos," Robert Jenson imagines, "prayer would be stupid or arrogant. God, as an outside artisan of the cosmos, would have to 'intervene' to respond to prayer; either he would thereby mess up its perfect clockwork, or the intervention would mean that the cosmic mechanism had been imperfectly made in the beginning and needed adjustment. But the world is not such a mechanism: it occurs rather in the freedom of history, and of a history in which we are participants....When we pray we ask God to listen to our advice about how the world should go."

If nothing else, Jesus gives us an imagination for the conversation prayer is. "I don't know about talking to an invisible God," one among you once said to me, "but I can talk to Jesus." Jesus was teaching them to pray every time he engaged them in conversation. He is doing the same with us, even now. Ask him at midnight for what you need and you just may find yourself (literally) in conversation with a friend who knows your every weakness because he himself has cried out in anguish and been met with silence. How else but in conversation with him, through the words of scripture and the witness of his church, could we trust that God is a God who will come after us when we are lost, dine with us when we are cast out by all others, welcome us home after we have wasted our lives and who will keep us from falling too far? How else but as God's Spirit (ours for the asking) intercedes between these words that bear witness to God and our lives lived without him, how else will we find ourselves accompanied along the way, how else will we learn how to pray?

"If God is not," George Buttrick wrote in his classic book entitled *Prayer*, "and the life of [mortals] poor, solitary, nasty, brutish and short, prayer is the veriest self-deceit. If God is, yet is known only as vague rumor and dark coercion, prayer is whimpering folly: it were nobler to die. But if God is in some deep and eternal sense, like Jesus, friendship with Him is our first concern, worthiest art, best resource, and sublimest joy." If God is in some deep and eternal sense like Jesus, we can talk: through thick or thin, come hell or high water, no holds barred; because friendship with him is the answer to my every wordless prayer. Thanks be to God. Amen.