

Ask, Search, Knock

Luke 11:1-13

Susan S. Izard

July 28, 2013

Once again, the summer lectionary offers us a story of Jesus as a teacher of wisdom. We looked at one story a few weeks ago when I preached on the famous scripture, "You reap what you sow." This week is an equally famous passage that begins with Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer and ends with well known words, "ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you."

Ministers often quote this scripture when they are teaching about prayer and God's presence with us. Over the years I have heard ministers advise people to "ask, and it will be given to you." After all, in our scripture, Jesus seems to promise that God will respond to us. Unfortunately, this scripture is often quoted out of context. Just ask, ministers teach, and it will be given. The problem is that people often ask God for things and their prayers have not been granted. Imagine the millions and millions of prayers through the centuries when people have asked God to heal the sick, find them a job or provide them with food, and none of the prayers were answered. When prayers aren't granted, people can feel that God has let them down and, therefore, God isn't real or doesn't care for us. The problem is that we've taken Jesus's wisdom teaching out of context. In our scripture passage, Jesus does not teach that we should ask for just anything. Jesus teaches that what we are asking, searching and knocking for is the Holy Spirit.

Listen to Jesus's words again: "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to 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. 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 not 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!" When we ask, search, knock, we are not being told to ask for our own desires, we are being taught to ask for the Holy Spirit to be present in our lives. This is a very different kind of prayer than one praying for our own desires and needs. The promise is that when we ask for the Holy Spirit, God will grant it to us.

It is important to remember that seeking the Holy Spirit is what Jesus did when he prayed. When he went off to a quiet place to pray, when he left the crowds and went into the desert, when he traveled on a different road so he could be alone, Jesus was finding the time to reconnect to God and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guided Jesus and his ministry. It was a critical part of the man, Jesus. So, it is natural for Jesus to want his followers to have this same energy and power guide their lives.

Jesus also knows that discovering the Holy Spirit in your life can be a bit tricky because it requires looking beyond the every day realities of life and into the mystery of God.

Encountering the Holy Spirit is a way of seeing the world through a different lens. It is the habit of humans to get wrapped up in our own thoughts and ideas and become consumed by them. When we seek the Holy Spirit, we have to open our minds to something greater than our own ideas.

One evening a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to play nine holes of golf. It was a lovely evening after a few days of rain, so I was glad to walk around for a few hours in the fresh air. I have become a bit of a golf fanatic, although I am not very good. When I was on the sixth hole ó a difficult par three ó I drove the ball into a sand trap. I must confess that I hate sand traps. I am not very good about getting out of them, and I have been known to have to hit the ball more than once to get out. When I know I'm in a trap, I get all worked up and start to worry about how I'll hit out. Will I do it well or will I waste three shots trying? By the time I walked down to the trap, I was in a complete snit, sure I'd never get out. Walking up to the trap, I was stunned to discover a huge beautiful butterfly with wings completely spread basking in the evening sun on the warm, wet sand. Seeing its tranquility and beauty completely changed my way of thinking. I was instantly reminded that God is not interested in how well I play golf. God is much more interested in whether or not I am taking in the beauty of the evening and soaking in the glory of a setting sun after days of rain. Ironically, when I finally got around to hitting out of the sand trap, I landed the ball three feet from the pin. I NEVER do that!

When seeking the Holy Spirit, we are invited to open our eyes to beauty, tranquility and a way of being that isn't all about our own agendas.

This way of being isn't just about how we hold our hearts and minds; it is also about how we become a doorway into the Spirit for others. When we ask God to grant us the Holy Spirit, we are invited to take on aspects of the Spirit that are visible in the world. In that way, we might become a doorway for others to come to know God.

Over this past month, I have met two new people on separate occasions that do not attend church here. However, when they found out I work at First Church, they both wanted to tell me stories about us. In both instances they had friends who had children die. Neither was a member here, but they ended up having memorial services for their children here because of connections with our church or the town. The people I met wanted to tell me about how much our church had meant to their friends during these times of grief. These services were held years ago, but family friends remembered our caring for others and how it had been a time of connecting with God's love.

Finally, when we ask for God's Spirit to be with us, we are placing ourselves in the presence of Holy Mystery.

The other day, I was talking with a pastor of a church not far from here. Over the years of coming for spiritual direction, I have been trying to encourage him to make time for

daily contemplative prayer ó also known as Centering Prayer. Contemplative prayer is silent prayer ó a time when our talking ends and our listening begins. It takes practice and a willingness to commit to waiting and seeing how God will show up. It is easy to set it aside and get busy with daily activity. The pastor explained that he wasn't really all that good about making time for contemplative prayer every day, but he was discovering that when he did take the time for Centering Prayer, his days were much more tranquil. On days that he prayed, things seemed to flow with ease and the regular tensions and stresses just didn't have the same power. He wondered out loud about why this was the case and then looked at me and said: "I guess that is the mystery."

He is right. It is a mysterious thing to discover that when we ask, search, and knock, our lives become intertwined with the Holy Spirit ó the living Presence of God. It is a presence that centers our lives in the story of love. It is not something we need to understand, it is just something we're promised to receive. So, Jesus says ó ask and it will be given to you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened.

May our lives be blessed with asking, searching and knocking. Amen.

© 2013, Susan Izard

First Church of Christ Congregational
United Church of Christ
12 South Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
860-233-9605 www.whfirstchurch.org