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## “Ask, Search, Knock”

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Matthew 7:7-12

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Today marks the fourth installment in our current series, “Best. Sermon. Ever.” To be clear, that title does not refer to today’s sermon. I have prepared diligently and carefully and will deliver this message to the best of my capability, but it will not be the *best sermon ever*. That distinction belongs to Jesus himself, or at least the words of Jesus compiled and shared by the writer of Matthew. Today we consider a portion of that teaching: ask, search, knock.

“Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.” It seems self-evident that Jesus is talking about prayer. But is prayer really that simple? If we pray, God will give us what we ask? That doesn’t seem to line up with the rest of Jesus’ teaching. It certainly doesn’t meet our own experiences of prayer.

But Jesus insists, “Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened.” How can that be? I know that, in my own life, I have often prayed for things that did not come to be, whether a childhood request to win a game or an adulthood yearning for the healing of a close friend. Did I not have enough faith? Was I not praying the right way? Was I asking for the wrong things?

It is certainly true that we do not always know how to pray. The things we ask may not be the things God wants for us. God is not a wish-granter, a genie we can summon by rubbing the lamp of pious petition. Our nature is inclined toward self-interest, to put our needs and desires before those of others. Culture only compounds our narcissism, constantly bombarding us with messages about individual achievement and consumption. Advertisements on television and other media try to convince us that we should buy a brand new car, either because we deserve to drive the best or because at these prices, anyone can afford one; to take the latest pill or injection to give us clearer skin, make us more virile, or to generally “fix” whatever condition we may have, even if it didn’t have a name until a year ago; or to sign up for a credit card that will allow us to purchase whatever we want or go wherever we want *and* give us money back for doing so (what a deal!). We easily can be convinced that our preferences are not only desired but *deserved*. Consequently, the blessings we ask from God might merely serve to further our own agendas, not to lead us to lives of greater meaning and purpose.

Besides asking for the wrong things, our searching, too, can be self-serving. So much of modern spirituality that is ostensibly about forming a divine connection is really more a pursuit of validation that, deep down, we’re basically good people and that God loves us just the way we are. Don’t get me wrong: positive self-image is important, and I believe God wants us to have the assurance of unconditional love. But God is more than a personal experience. And while I believe that God loves us as we are, God’s love calls us to keep growing, to mature in faith and in the ways we relate to God and one another. There’s nothing wrong with being open to a more expansive experience of God, but that search should be about discovering the fullness of God on God’s terms, not figuring out how God can fit into our own constructs.

We knock in anticipation of a door being opened to us. Often, we’re knocking on the doors of opportunity, advancement, and upward mobility. Despite our identity as followers of Christ, we succumb to the values of a society based on achievement and acquisition. About 15 years ago, author Lynne Twist wrote a book titled, *The Soul of Money*. It is a powerful commentary on our relationship with money, and the first chapter alone is a sermon in itself. Reflecting on the relentless pursuit of worldly success, she writes:

We worry that if we stop striving for more, we’ll somehow lose our place on the team, or lose our advantage. If we’re not gaining ground, we feel that we’re losing it. If we’re not ahead of others financially, or at least even with them, we feel we’re falling behind and need to catch up. The game can be exciting at times, scary at other times, but always the stakes are high because, on the playing field of money, if we’re not winners, we’re losers. ... Even when the game is going our way, we often feel a nagging disconnect, the gap between the way we imagine life should be and the way we’re living it,

under the day-to-day pressure to earn more, buy more, save more, get more, have more, and to be more.<sup>1</sup>

But what about when our prayers are not selfish? What about when we *are* praying for the right things, or at least praying with the right intention? Why doesn't God grant what we ask? Why does it sometimes feel like God is absent when we are most in need?

"Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish?" In ancient Galilee, bread and fish were dietary staples, necessities of daily life. A stone would be a poor substitute for a loaf of bread; even less a snake for a fish. We may not be able to provide everything we would like to give our children, but we know how to provide at least for their basic needs, though in this world we know that not all parents do so. If even we know what children need, how much better will our *heavenly* parent provide for us? Perhaps the lesson is that God knows what we need better than we do ourselves, that God may not give us everything we want, but God will provide what we need.

Jesus's instruction to ask, search, and knock came within the context of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus set the bar high, calling us to love our enemies, to always put others before ourselves, to make the kingdom of God our highest priority, and to be perfect as God is perfect. He knew that what he asked seemed impossible, but he also wanted us to know that God would provide the help we need to live up to our calling and the grace to forgive us when we fail. In conclusion, he offered a simple rule of thumb to remember: "treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you." This is often referred to as the Golden Rule, which many of us learned as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Jesus said, "this is the Law and the Prophets," meaning that it is the guiding principle behind every instruction in scripture. Whether we're talking about words, attitudes, behaviors, or motivation, we should always treat one another in the way we would want people to treat us. That is no guarantee of reciprocation. We cannot count on others to treat us the way we want. We cannot control the people around us, but we can own our actions and do our own work.

Jesus's instruction to ask, search, and knock was a way of helping us to understand and trust in God's provision. The standards he set for his followers to live into the kingdom of God as he imagined it would require more than just good intention or commitment. But Jesus also knew that life would bring other challenges for us to face in addition to living up to our calling. The human side of him knew the pain and hardship of this world. Asking, searching, and knocking are postures of prayer we should adopt, guidance for finding God's provision in every circumstance.

As a lifelong follower of Jesus and now as a pastor, I have been part of several faith communities and have been privileged to walk closely with people in many facets of life. I have watched children grow in faith from childhood to adulthood. I have presided over weddings and have walked with people when their marriages fell apart. I have held newborn children and kept vigil as saints transitioned from this life to the next. I have guided people as they first encountered God's grace for themselves and been privileged to baptize people of all ages. I have sat in homes and hospitals with people who fervently prayed for healing for themselves and their loved ones, and been there to celebrate recovery and to grieve loss. I've long since given up trying to explain why things happen the way they do or to understand God's role in every outcome. I do not believe that God causes us to suffer any more than God causes a fly ball to clear a fence to win a game. Jesus does not provide an answer to the question of why. And yet, if we allow Jesus' words to take root in us, we learn to experience God even in the hardest times, to find meaning and presence no matter what our circumstances may be.

*Ask.* Bring what is on your heart to God. That's not because God requires you to explain – God knows the prayer on your heart before it reaches your tongue – but because we all need to express what we feel, that for which we long. Whether our words are prayers of gratitude or lament, of praise or petition, we trust that God will hear us. Expressing those things in prayer is at least as important for what it does for us as what it does for God. Page through the Psalms and you'll discover prayers and songs encompassing the full range of human emotion, from joy to anger, from triumph to despair. God does not always give us what we ask, but the asking itself shapes us, helping us to release our fears and worries into God's hands and teaching us to move beyond our immediate wants and needs to a wider view and a higher purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> Lynne Twist. *The Soul of Money: Reclaiming the Wealth of Our Inner Resources*. New York: W. W. Norton (2006), 6.

*Search.* Searching is different than asking. We *ask* for what we want, but we *search* for meaning. We *search* for wisdom. We *search* for God. Rather than relying on an accidental encounter, searching is active, raising our attention and our awareness to see what we might not otherwise notice. When we search, God makes Godself known, sometimes in unexpected ways. God may not appear in a dramatic revelation or in a tangible, measurable way, but God's promise is to never leave us nor forsake us. That sustaining presence is what the apostle Paul learned when he prayed for healing, but instead discovered that God's grace was sufficient, that God's power was made perfect in his weakness. God does not keep us from experiencing hardship, but God will not leave us to endure it alone.

*Knock.* We knock on a door we want to open but cannot open ourselves. That door must be opened to us. It might be a door to a job opportunity, a new relationship, a college admission, starting or expanding a family, a diagnosis or treatment plan, or a new chapter in our life with God. We may knock on the same door over and over again, frustrated that it does not open. Sometimes it does, sometimes it does not. But if we step back and take a look around, we may discover another way. How often have you had one door close only to have another open? That has been true many times for me, though I usually find it difficult to look for what God is providing when my focus is entirely devoted to the direction I want to go. The door we choose may not always be possible, but God has a way of making a way out of no way.

*Ask. Search. Knock.* Though we might prefer for prayer to be more transactional, that is not how God works. According to worldly wisdom, nothing is given; it must be earned or taken. But God's ways are not our ways. God calls us to pray, not to offer a wish list for God to fulfill, but so we can grow in faith and in our relationship with God.

My prayer for us today is that we experience a deeper level of connection with God through prayer. May we discover a God who meets us in our need and sustains us on the journey. May we learn to trust in God even when we do not understand, even when the path before us is concealed. Ask, search, and knock, because no matter what we may experience in this life, we are never alone. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever searches, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened. Thanks be to God. Amen.