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The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 18a, August 6, 2023  
Matthew 7:6-12

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”

Ask. Seek. Knock.

This is a sermon about prayer. I aim for it to be a practical sermon. A user-friendly sermon. Because today’s Gospel text is a practical text. Jesus is telling us what to do in a concrete and straightforward way.

What if we have been inspired by His words in the Sermon on the Mount, and we want to live the kind of life and be the kind of people He is urging on us, but we don’t even know where to start? What if we have been listening to everything Jesus has said in the last three chapters of Matthew, about purity of heart, blessing our enemies, refraining from judgment and hypocrisy, and not being anxious about anything, and now we are thinking, that all sounds pretty good, but it’s out of my reach? Those goals are too lofty for me.

Then today’s Gospel lesson is for you! God is eager to give good gifts to His children, but He wants to be asked. He wants us to seek Him out in prayer and never give up.

Let me add a caveat right off the bat. This is not a “prosperity gospel” type sermon. God is not a wish-granting genie who will give you a mansion because you rubbed the prayer lamp just the right way. This is also not a sermon in which I will in any way suggest that if you haven’t received something it’s because you didn’t pray hard enough for it or with the right kind of faith. I think that would be a terribly cruel and wrongheaded way to interpret Jesus’s message here.

There might be something you have been longing for and praying for with all your heart. A new job, a romantic partner, a better marriage, a child, healing from illness or pain, a favorable outcome of some kind, a better relationship with certain people in your life. It could be just about anything. And maybe this idea of “just ask” is painful to you, because you have not received what you have asked for and it seems to you that God is not answering your prayers.

If this describes you, then please take heart, because I am going to address you in particular when I come to the part about knocking.

But the crux of today's text, the most important point that Jesus is trying to get across to us here, is that God wants us to come to Him, to talk to Him, to be in close relationship to Him. Jesus is making an audacious statement when He urges us to ask, seek, and knock. God wants to hear from you! He wants you to ask for things. He wants your attention. He wants you to spend time with Him.

I think I could even put it this way. God doesn't mind if you pester Him. He will never get tired of you.

What Jesus is driving at here and in the Sermon on the Mount as a whole is how to have a closer relationship with the Lord. That's the goal of Christian life. Sure, it involves being more Christlike and obeying the commandments. It involves following the Golden Rule, being diligent in worship and the use of the means of grace, and spreading love and light in the name of Jesus.

I will go out on a limb and guess that most of us are here because we want to be closer to the Lord in some way. We came here today - at least on some level - because we are seeking intimacy with Him. And if that does not describe you, pause and at least ask yourself, is that something you would turn down?! A deeper relationship with God?

That is what Jesus is offering us here. Part of following Jesus and being more like Him is entering into His closeness with the Father. When Jesus teaches His disciples the Lord's prayer, He is inviting them to pray with Him to *His* Abba. And that means inviting us to pray like Him: frequently, about everything, bringing all our joys and sorrows and doubts and fears before the Lord Who loves us.

It's amazing how often we squander this privilege. Jesus says we can take everything to God in prayer, but do we? Maybe we are afraid that if we pray too much or ask for too much, we are abusing our privilege instead. Maybe we worry that we will bother God and annoy Him with petty things, so we better save our prayers for the big things. Or maybe we have just started to believe, consciously or subconsciously, that God isn't really listening, and so we have dropped the habit of personal prayer almost altogether.

Jesus is here to ease our minds. The Father *is* listening, and He wants us to turn to Him with everything. To get His point across, Jesus tells that absurd

little anecdote about earthly fathers. I am quite sure it was meant to get a chuckle out of His listeners. You don't think an earthly father, even a bad one, would give his son rocks instead of bread or snakes instead of fish, do you? So why are you so intimidated about bringing your requests to God, who is surely even less likely to play a mean prank on you?! There is no request too small or petty for the Lord, because He wants you to come to Him in prayer, because that is the method by which He will shape you and fit you for His Kingdom.

Here is something I have come to believe. You can take your spiritual temperature by looking at how often you turn to the Lord in prayer. You might obey all the commandments. You might come to church regularly. You might tithe and give to charity and do good deeds. You might even read your Bible daily. But if you were to step back and ask yourself, do I have a deep and satisfying relationship with the Lord, the first thing you would need to look at is the quality of your prayer life. Do you regularly "check in" with God throughout the day?

Maybe that sounds a bit strange to you, a bit too casual. But I think it's a good way to put it and here's why.

Let's say that you are struggling in a relationship. Maybe you and your spouse are quarrelling or feel as though you are drifting apart. Or maybe you have friendships that just don't feel the same anymore. Let's say you take the courageous step of seeking out a counselor or a therapist to help you with your problem. I am going to guess that one of the first things the therapist will want to work on with you is communication. You don't usually feel close to someone to whom you can't express yourself and be vulnerable, and you aren't likely to maintain a good relationship with someone if you rarely talk to him or her, or if you only discuss superficial things.

Good communication is the foundation of all healthy relationships. And the more intimate the relationship, the more types of communication you engage in. You are probably not that intimate with your boss or your boss's boss. If you have to communicate with him or her, you will probably construct a carefully worded email with a proper greeting and a formal tone. You probably don't send a string of informal texts throughout the day. You don't ask what they want for dinner or forward funny memes or tell them when you feel sad. But if it's your husband or your wife or a family member, or your boyfriend or your girlfriend or other close friend, you don't stand on formality or limit your communication to the essentials. You talk or exchange messages frequently. The closer you are, the more you check in with one another. The more intimate the relationship, the less likely you are to worry

that what you want to say isn't important enough to be worth saying. You are free to share yourself.

I certainly don't want to make a flippant analogy, but I think that Jesus's words here mean that we should talk to God more like a friend than a boss. Be reverent before the Lord Almighty, but don't be afraid to knock on His door at any hour because you need something or you want to chat.

There is a practical aspect to this. The more you pray, the more you put your needs and hopes and fears and regrets into words, the more clarity you will gain. God will use your prayers to help you discern what you might need to do, how you might need to change your thinking about something, or to give you comfort and reassurance. As you pray, you are fixing your attention on the Lord, and that alone might prove the solution to your distress or the fulfillment of your longing.

And if it seems as though your prayers are going unanswered or if you feel that are waiting and waiting on the Lord in vain, it might be that He is using that time to shape you in ways that you cannot even imagine right now. If you don't get the answer you want, you are invited to knock and knock again. You have permission to be persistent, to pound the door in desperation if need be, because as you are pleading for God's attention it may just be that this is how He is getting yours. You may find that you try different doors to knock on or that doors are revealed to you that you did not see before. It may be that this time of seeking and knocking is a time that God is using to strengthen you or prepare you or to transform you in some way that has not yet been revealed. Because that is how God works. He rarely provides quick fixes or instantaneous transformations. He is changing us from the inside out, and this process involves time as we grow closer and closer to Him.

Jesus invites us to be intimate with the Father, to be on shockingly familiar terms with the Creator of the Universe. That is where the entire Sermon on the Mount is leading, to a life lived in ever closer communion with the Triune God.

Many of us feeling comfortable talking *about* God. There is nothing wrong with that, but it would be strange indeed if your closest, most intimate friend was someone you talked more *about* than *to*. Imagine instead how much your life might change if you made it a habit to bring everything before God all the time, without hesitation or filter.

This means that you don't have to have everything sorted out before you pray. You don't even have to have the words, because the Holy Spirit is

praying with you and translating those groans that come from deep within. If you are sad, or angry, or struggling with sin, or confused, or just a mess in general, bring it to the Lord. He will help you sort it out. But you have to start by praying.

Let me tell you a little story from my own life and maybe it will help you understand what I am driving at.

Half a lifetime ago, I was faced with a big decision. I did not know what to do and I felt paralyzed by this. I was worried about doing the wrong thing in God's eyes, and the anxiety turned me into a hot mess. But I was an earnest Christian, or at least, if you had known me and how much I loved to go to church and read theology books, that is what you would have assumed about me.

So to help me with this big life decision, I made an appointment with my pastor at the time. I wanted his theological counsel.

This pastor listened to me patiently and then the first words out of his mouth were, "Did you pray about it?" Brothers and sisters, I have to confess to you that I was downright annoyed by this response! I was thinking, I came to you, the pastor, for advice! I have already gone the next level up! What's the point of me praying about it now? I just need a yes or a no from you. Am I doing the right thing or not? I figured God already knows about the situation anyway, so what's the point of talking to Him more? I won't get any new information that way. I wanted an answer, I wanted it to be black and white, and I wanted it to be instantaneous.

More than twenty years have passed since then, and I can see now how spiritually immature I was. I wanted to make sure I didn't get in trouble with God, as though He were an intimidating, remote, cosmic boss, but it does not seem like I was looking for much of a relationship with Him. If I had heeded Jesus's words to ask, seek, and knock, I would have spent hours in prayer about my decision instead of just trying to outsource it. I could have poured my heart out to God and talked it over with Him. But I did not use my Jesus-won privilege to "check in" with the Father as often as I needed and wanted and more. What a gift I squandered!

Isn't it wonderful that we have a whole lifetime to get closer to the Lord, and that it's never too late to knock on His door?

God wants you to talk to Him. He wants to hear from you, and He wants to be in an intimate relationship with you. The more you pray, the more you turn

to Him, the more you will find yourself hearing back from Him, the more His Word will open up to you.

If you were to come to me, now a pastor myself, with the same sort of big life issue that I agonized over all those years ago.... Maybe you are facing a big decision about your career or your relationship. Maybe you find yourself in an ethical quandary. Maybe you are in a crisis of some kind, or maybe it's just a small issue but it's weighing on you. If you were to come to me because you wanted to talk it over with me, this is what I would say.

Did you pray about it?

I would listen to you with my whole heart. I would ask you questions to get some clarity. I would do my very best to help you think through the issue from a biblical perspective and point you to the relevant Scripture passages. If it was a moral issue, I would, if possible, explain the teaching of the Church on the subject. I would reassure you of God's love and mercy. I would preach the law and proclaim the gospel as necessary, because that is my job. And I would pray with you. It would be my privilege and joy to pray with you.

But then I would ask you again, did *you* pray about it? And I would exhort you to keep praying about it. Pray alone, pray with a pastor, pray with friends, but don't stop praying. Keep knocking on the door. God is listening. He knows what you need, but He wants to hear it from you. The Lord wants you to share your life with Him, as He has shared His with you. And if you are hoping to hear His answer, you need to keep those channels of communication open.

This is what Jesus is urging on us in the Sermon on the Mount. A prayer-saturated life. That is how Jesus lived, and that is the joy that He wishes for us to have too.

To Him be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.