

ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

MATTHEW 7:7-12

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

AUGUST 20, 2017/11TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Last week, we spent some time in the Vancouver area visiting family and friends. Naomi also ran a half-marathon while I heroically drank coffee and read the newspaper.

On the drive out to BC, we found ourselves in fairly thick smoke for nearly eight hours of the drive, from Golden to Vancouver. Often you couldn't even see the mountains from the highway.

And as we were driving, I found myself thinking a fairly simple thought: "You know, an awful lot of people are hoping and praying for rain right now and have been for some time. Why won't it rain?"

This got me thinking more generally about asking for stuff from God.

We do this a lot.

We very pray for peace in a world of violence and war. Many of us continue to think of the events from last weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia. We pray for the victims. We pray, if we're able, for the perpetrators.

We pray for a future that seems ominous, where it's not at all hard to imagine things getting worse before they get better.

This week brought news of terror attacks in Barcelona and other parts of northern Spain and Finland. We pray that darkened young minds would choose better paths, we pray that evil would be restrained.

Again, even as we pray, we perhaps worry that things will only get worse.

We pray for those we love who are going through health challenges. We ask for healing, relief from pain, and hope for better days ahead. We pray this because we want good for those we care about and we believe that God wants good for them, too.

We pray for those are struggling in a relationship or who are facing financial stress. We pray for those navigating depression and anxiety.

I sat down one morning and thought about all the people in my own little orbit who right now are going through hard things. Really hard things.

I'm not going to name the issues and the stories to protect people's privacy, but I don't think any of them would surprise you because you know people going through similar things in your own orbits.

In each of these examples, we ask for what we want. Something is wrong, and we want God to fix it.

In fact, many of our prayers could be reduced to the temporary title that Ernie gave my sermon in the order of worship this week until I came up with my own: God, fix all the bad stuff, make it better.

That's what we want. That's what we ask for.

And based on our passage this morning, it seems like we have good grounds for adopting this approach.

Ask, Jesus says, and you will receive.

This is followed by about two chapters of people asking and receiving.

A man with leprosy says, "Lord if you are willing you can make me clean." And Jesus is willing (8:1-4).

A Roman centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus speaks the word and it is done (8:5-13).

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and many who were demon-possessed (8:14-17).

Jesus calms a storm for his panicky disciples. Even the wind and the waves do what Jesus wants. Which made me think again that it wouldn't be too hard for God to send a little rain BC's way (8:23-27).

Jesus casts a legion of demons that were tormenting two men into a herd of pigs. They didn't even have to ask and they received (8:28-34).

Jesus heals a paralyzed man (9:1-8), raises the daughter of a leader of the synagogue from the dead, and a woman who simply touches his cloak is relieved of twelve years of suffering (9:18-26).

The blind and mute approach Jesus pleading "Have mercy on us, Son of David." And he does (9:27-34).

That's a lot of asking and answering. And that's only a page and a half in Matthew's gospel. We could obviously find many more examples if we kept going in Matthew and into Mark, Luke, and John.

And it doesn't even seem to matter much who's doing the asking. Lepers, blind and mute, a desperate woman, a paralytic, but also a Roman centurion and a leader of the synagogue.

The only common denominator seems to be that something is wrong and someone wants Jesus to fix it.

It's the same for us. Something is wrong and we want God to fix it.

Sometimes God does. There are times when our petitions are answered in just the way we want. I've heard stories of miraculous healings, of rescued marriages, of troubled kids returning home, of the clouds of depression lifting.

But more often, the bad stuff remains. Why?

Jesus says that even we, who are sinful human beings know how to give good gifts to our children and how much more, therefore, will your Father in heaven do this for us?

But what about when he doesn't?

I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you at the outset. I don't have a comprehensive answer to the question of how and when and why prayer doesn't "work" the way we want it to.

But I want to make three comments about this passage in Matthew. I hope they can help us make sense out of a passage that seems, at face value, to set up impossible expectations for us.

First, the stories recorded in Matthew 7-8 are descriptive, not prescriptive. They were announcements of Jesus' identity and ministry in a specific time and place in God's story. They are not recipes for all people getting bad stuff fixed all the time, much as we might prefer that they were.

Jesus' healing was part of his bringing and enacting of the kingdom of God, fulfilling ancient prophecies that talked about how God's anointed one would bring good news to the poor, would release prisoners, recover the sight of the blind and set the oppressed free.

Jesus miracles aren't timeless templates for all people at all times. They're more like declarations of Jesus' identity.

Second, God is not Santa Claus. We know this, even if we often treat God like this in our prayers.

We know, from other parts of the gospels and the rest of Scripture that God is not a vending machine for human beings to plug in some good behaviour and get the prize they want. So we should take this as a clue that this passage can't be about that and look for other ways of interpreting it.

As I read and reread these chapters in Matthew this week, another interpretation occurred to me. I don't know if someone else has thought of this before me or not (I suspect it's not unique to me!), but I submit it to you this morning as one option.

Earlier I talked about the two chapters that come *after* this morning's text. What if we look at the two chapters that come *before* Jesus' words about asking, seeking, knocking.

Here, we encounter, of course, the early parts of the Sermon on the Mount.

1. The Beatitudes (5:2-12)
2. Salt and light—acting as a light *in* the darkness (which presumes there will still be darkness) and as a preservative in a context where there corruption will remain (5:13- 16)
3. Not being angry with our brother and sister, about settling matters quickly, about being reconciled (5:21-26)
4. About avoiding lust, about eliminating that which leads us into sin (5:27-30)
5. About the immorality of adultery and the tight restrictions around divorce (5:31-32)
6. About avoiding oaths (5:33-37)
7. About not resisting an evil person, turning the other cheek, giving to anyone who asks (5:38-42)
8. About loving enemies (5:43-48)
9. About doing our good deeds in silence, not requiring the notice and applause of others (6:1-4)
10. About praying as Jesus taught us to in the Lord’s prayer, longing for God’s kingdom to come on earth as in heaven (6:5-15)
11. About fasting—disciplining our desires, training ourselves to hunger for that which does not spoil or fade (6:16-18)
12. About not worrying (6:25-33)
13. And, just before our passage today, words about not judging lest we be judged (7:1-6)

These are hard words. This is thought by many to be the hardest and most idealistic part of Jesus’ teaching.

And ***right after all this***, Jesus says, “ask, seek, knock.”

You will receive. You will find. The door will be opened. Your father wants to give you these good gifts.

What if Jesus assumes that our seeking, knocking, and asking is not about unfolding a laundry list of “bad stuff we’d like God to fix in our lives and in the world?”

What if, when Jesus says, “ask, seek, knock” he’s talking about asking, seeking, and knocking our way toward becoming the kinds of people that he has just finished describing?

He knows this way of living doesn’t come naturally to us. He knows that we read Matthew 5-7 and think, “who can do that?”

And so he says, “Ask, seek, knock.”

Third, Jesus himself is familiar with asking and not receiving.

Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me... Jesus knows the experience of wanting an easier road and yet still having to walk through pain. Even from within Jesus’ own story we see that Matthew 7 is not a blank cheque from heaven.

I hope these three points can help us make interpretive sense of a passage in the Bible that is sometimes used by well-meaning Christians to claim that with enough faith we can get whatever we want from God.

But of course we aren’t just interested in making sense of a few verses in the bible, are we?

What I’ve said thus far might help us with our understanding of Matthew 7:7-12. I sincerely hope it does.

But we want more than to just figure out a tricky part of the bible. We want to know how to *live* in a world where prayers seem to go unanswered! We want to know how to pray, how to keep hoping, how to anchor ourselves in goodness in the midst of all the bad stuff that still needs to be fixed remains.

We want to know how to be people of faith, hope, and love even when the disease spreads, even when the child continues down a bad path, even when world is still stained with the deeds of violent men, even when the innocent still suffer.

Three concluding comments:

First, keep asking. Persevere.

Like the persistent widow in Luke 18.

Like Simeon, who had spent his whole life waiting and longing for God's Messiah, the "consolation of Israel."

Like Job who, even in the midst of all his unbearable suffering, could say, "I know my redeemer lives and in the end he will stand upon the earth."

We keep asking, even if the answer doesn't seem to be coming. We believe that the asking, seeking, and knocking are part of how God is making all things new.

We don't understand the timing. We don't understand the pain and frustration that come along the way. But we believe that our hunger for things to be other than they are—in the world, in our lives, in the lives of those we love—is a hunger that has been given to us by God.

Karl Barth:

To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.

Second, check your motives. This one is perhaps a bit harder to hear but we must pay attention to the entire counsel of Scripture.

James 4 says,

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

We must acknowledge that at least *some* of the time, our motives in asking, seeking, and knocking are selfish. We're not interested in how we might be shaped as human

beings by hard roads. We like the quick fix and have been conditioned to like this by an instant culture.

Sometimes, God has bigger and better plans for us than we do for ourselves!

Finally, be open to God answering your prayers in ways you don't anticipate. God is famous for doing unexpected things.

Eighteen years or so ago, like many young couples, Naomi and I decided we wanted to start a family. After a few years and a battery of tests, it became rather obvious to us that this wasn't likely to happen biologically. So we prayed. We asked. We sought. We pounded on the door. Others did the same on our behalf. But Naomi didn't get pregnant. For many years, it simply felt like the door was closed, like the asking was ignored.

Now, eighteen years and sixteen year old twins later, we would say that God has answered our prayer. But it was in a way that we weren't asking for at the time, and probably couldn't have imagined.

God had bigger (literally!) and better plans for us.

And God is also famous, I'm sorry to say, for leading his people down difficult roads. The examples in Scripture are too numerous to even mention. I don't think it's even possible to find a character in the bible that didn't encounter tremendous trials on their journey with God.

This is one of the ways in which God grows his people.

In John 10:10, Jesus says "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full."

In John 16:33, Jesus say, "In this world, you will have trouble."

Not *might* have trouble. Will. Trouble will find you.

We live our lives in between these two statements.

Fullness of life can and must coexist with the reality of trouble.

Jesus holds out the hope that it is possible to experience peace and fullness of life even when we know bad things will happen because of who God is and what God has done. The fullness of God's future trickles back into the land of trouble and helps us to transcend and redeem and lament and grieve and hope and persevere here and now.

Jesus says one more thing: "But take heart, I have overcome the world."

Take heart. Ask, seek, knock. Keep going.

I want to close by reading a few lines from a song. Very often, music speaks to me in profound ways. Our artists are very often our prophets.

The song is by a band called The Civil Wars and it's called "From the Valley":

Oh, the desert dreams of a river
That will run down to the sea
Like my heart longs for an ocean
To wash down over me.

Oh, won't you take me from this valley
To that mountain high above?
I will pray, pray, pray
Until I see your smiling face.
I will pray, pray, pray
To the one I love.

Oh, the outcast dreams of acceptance,
Just to find pure love's embrace
Like an orphan longs for his mother.
May you hold me in your grace.

Won't you take me from this valley
To that mountain high above?
I will pray, pray, pray
Until I see your smiling face.

I will pray, pray, pray
To the one I love.

Oh, the caged bird dreams of a strong wind
That will flow 'neath her wings.
Like a voice longs for a melody,
Oh, Jesus carry me.

Won't you take me from this valley
To that mountain high above?
I will pray, pray, pray
Until I see your smiling face.
I will pray, pray, pray
To the one I love.

All of our asking, seeking, and knocking is not to a generic dispenser of desirable outcomes. That's Santa Claus.

We pray to one who loves us, one who smiles upon us. We pray to the one we love and we trust that his love is strong enough to lead us through the valley to all the way to the top of the mountain.

Amen.

