

“ASKING, SEEKING, KNOCKING”

Matthew 7:7-11

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One of the great things about the Bible is the way it speaks to us in so many different ways, and on so many different levels. No matter how many times we hear some scripture passages, they always have something fresh to say to us. At different stages of life, as our circumstances or our questions or our context changes, familiar Biblical texts come alive for us in new ways.

I found that particularly true in reflecting on today's text. Jesus' words about asking, seeking and knocking can be, and often are, read as a kind of primer on persistence in prayer ... or (depending on your point of view) on getting God to give you what you want.

But it's also possible to hear them in a way that's more ... personal, perhaps, or timely, or maybe contextual would be a better word. What I mean is that we can hear Jesus say those words to us, right now, in the perplexity we feel in these days. That's how I heard them, and kept on hearing them as I read them this week. I couldn't separate these things Jesus said about asking, seeking, and knocking from the stuff that's been on my mind. And what's been on my mind is Charlottesville, and racism, and the responsibility of Christians in this time.

So I start with asking:

Dear God, when will it end?

Can't you please put a stop to these hate groups? The Southern Poverty Law Center says there are 800 or more of them in the U.S. now. How can that be? How can there be 8 people who want to wave Confederate flags and Nazi symbols and chant anti-Jewish, anti-black, anti-gay, anti-immigrant slogans, let alone *800 groups*? It's hard to contemplate this without feeling contaminated by the evil of it. I hear some people say, "they're a tiny minority fringe, just ignore them and they'll go away," but I'm not so sure we can be so complacent. They've been around a long time and only seem to be bolder than ever. Can their hearts be changed? Dear God, we need help to know what to do.

I fear for all the people these people hate. Protect them, I pray.

Protect also the fearful and alienated souls who are vulnerable to the appeal of these groups, especially the young. Give them other, better communities in which to find belonging, affirmation, and pride.

Protect us all from the contagion of hate. Help us to resist it in every way we can. Make us aware of the temptation – subtle, but real - to minimize or excuse it.

God, I want to ask, "where did this come from?" but I know this has been with us for a long, long time, simmering under our polite surfaces. Charlottesville seems like a wake-up call, but I know people of color never thought, as some of us white folks did, that racism was a thing of the past. So instead I ask, "help us, somehow, come to grips with this."

Which means, I think, that I need to ask for forgiveness for personally being blind to it, and maybe for forgiveness for the church for not being a stronger voice against racism – and especially for the white church for being so entrenched in privilege that we haven't seen the problem. Do our hearts need to be changed too?

Asking these questions, asking these things of God leads me to the realization that I need to do some searching, a lot of searching. There is a lot I don't know. There are gaps in my knowledge and experience. The church has shied away from painful topics. We all have lots of blind spots. I start to see what Jesus is telling us about the nature of prayer. True prayer doesn't ever stop with asking God for things, even good things. True prayer goes beyond asking God, "why?" True prayer gets us seeking – for more understanding, for some new ideas, for a more honest assessment, for growth, for connection with others, for ways to change things, for what God is calling us to.

I'm starting to see that I – we – need to seek both knowledge and understanding of the history that has been mostly invisible to us – the role of slavery in our history, the development of racism to justify that institution, the systemic racism that followed and it's social and economic consequences. Most of us know far too little.

I see too that I need to seek to let go of everything I want to believe about racism being a thing of the past. It's not. We must seek to see why it is that although only about half of white Americans think racism is a big problem, nearly all African-Americans do.

I need to seek grace and patience to hear – and not minimize – the experiences of people of color.

I can see that we need to seek connection with people and with groups working against racism and hate in our community.

We need to seek courage for conversations about this. And we need to seek courage for public witness. It distresses me – I hope it distresses us all – that many of the hate groups loudly identify themselves as Christians. People outside the church are hearing that and seeing that. They need to see, instead, what Jesus really calls his people to stand for.

We need to seek a way to respond that isn't hate for hate, yet gives no excuse, no cover, no mixed message about the wrongness of hate.

And yes, I think all this is prayer, too. Seeking understanding, grace, openness, faithfulness, courage, God's leading, and a way to be in the face of evil is prayer.

And then what? Some people say prayer changes things. Others say, probably more accurately, that prayer changes *us*. This kind of prayer surely does. It seems to me that Jesus is suggesting that a new kind of persistence and resolve and commitment eventually emerges. Ask. Seek. *Knock*.

Where are we knocking, exactly?
Are we, as the song says, “knocking on heaven’s door”?

Richard Foster, a Christian writer who delves extensively into every aspect of prayer and spirituality, talks about this as prophetic prayer – prayer that envisions a different kind of future and does not let go of that vision of justice and peace. It’s a kind of spiritual defiance of the world as it is. Our prayer, he says, “undermines the status quo. It is a spiritual underground resistance movement. We are subversives in a world of injustice, oppression and violence. Like [the Biblical prophet] Amos... we demand that ‘justice roll down like waters....’ (Amos 5:24) We plead the case of the orphan and the widow, or whoever the helpless ones are in our context. In our prayers and our actions we stand firm against racism, sexism, nationalism, ageism, and every other “ism” that separates and splits and divides. We become the voice of the voiceless, pleading their cause all the way to the throne of heaven. We demand to be heard.” (Foster, p. 247)

Foster quotes Biblical scholar Walter Wink who says that “Biblical prayer ... is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an outdoor bazaar than the polite monologues” we sometimes call prayer in church.

We speak to God about the injustices that trouble us, about the people who suffer from them, about the brokenness in our society. We speak to others as well. Perhaps this knocking also includes knocking on the doors of power, demanding that our leaders attend to the concerns of minority communities, immigrants, children; that systemic racism and economic inequity be addressed; that we find ways to combat the rise of hate groups and to discourage violence.

Perhaps it includes knocking heads a little bit with folks we know, challenging assumptions and stereotypes and acceptance of privilege as a matter of course.

Maybe we need to be knocking also at the closed doors in our own minds that do not want to admit that we have benefitted from the oppression of others and do not want to know the realities of racism.

Maybe we need to be knocking on the walls – knocking down the walls? – we have built between ourselves and those we think are “other.”

I admit that I puzzled a bit over this metaphor of *knocking*. I mean, *asking* and *seeking* have fairly straightforward meanings in the context of a discussion on prayer. But knocking, literally, describes a whole different sort of physical action: standing in front of a door and tapping (or banging) on it, hoping to be let in. Here’s what I finally realized: knocking on a door is a sign that you are ready to cross a threshold into a different space.

In prayer, that different space might be a place of acceptance, a new life path, a deeper faith, a changed perspective... or a resolve to act. Knocking is saying that we are willing to participate with God in the answers to our prayers. It’s making our prayers more than words and thoughts and ideas, turning them into realities in our church and community and world. It’s

taking what we know and learn and believe and letting God use those things to change our lives. It's being truly committed, with our whole selves, to that for which we are praying.

Ask. Seek. Knock.

This is what it is to pray "Thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven."

This is what it is to seek the reign of God above all else.

This is what it is to be light in the world.

Resources:

Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*

Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation Commentary)