

Pastor's Message – Palm Sunday, 2021  
Sermon on the Mount: Ask, Seek, Knock  
Matthew 7:7-11

I've been a Milwaukee Brewers fan since their earliest days in Milwaukee and in those early days, I would sit on the screened porch in the summertime at our home and listen to the games on my little transistor radio. Some of you might remember those. I longed for a better radio and asked one year for just that – with a cassette player. Some of you might remember cassette tapes. And then, that year, a new radio/cassette player was wrapped under the Christmas Tree for me. What a thrilling gift! I used that radio/cassette player for a long time.

Another year, I asked for a telescope and that year there was a long box under the Christmas Tree. I don't know whatever happened to that telescope. I think it ended up in the attic - never to be seen again. Sometimes we ask for things that we use and are valuable and sometimes we ask for things that never measure up to our hopes and dreams. Sometimes we ask for things that we think we need and sometimes for things that we want. Sometimes they appear and sometimes they don't.

Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that our prayers to God are not cold requests to a distant deity, who must be coaxed and appeased. Sometimes we pray to a vending machine god expecting snacks to slide down the chute when we put in our money. Prayer to God should be more than that. Our prayers can be voiced in a deep, trusting relationship like that of a parent and child. So, we call God, "Father." Just as we expect good parents to do what is best for their kids, we expect God to do what is best for us.

Prayer is very much a matter of asking and receiving, but it is also more. It is seeking over time and finding. We can be knocking at the door with the same request not for a day, but for years. Along the way, prayer is the means by which we discover the will of God for our lives, that which will always be good, pleasing and perfect (Romans 12:2). It's what we expect from a good parent: good parenting.

Emily Dickinson, at least in her poetry, struggled with the efficacy of prayer. Does prayer really work? She wondered in verse if God was listening when she prayed. She wrote:

*Prayer is the little implement  
Through which men reach  
Where presence is denied them.  
They fling their speech  
By means of it in God's ear;  
If then He hear,  
This sums the apparatus  
Comprised in prayer.*

(Emily Dickinson. *Complete Poems*, 1924.)

There is an iffiness to Emily's prayers, a wondering if God listens. In another poem she shares the disappointment that comes from a long-term prayer apparently unanswered.

*There comes an hour when begging stops,  
When the long interceding lips  
Perceive their prayer is vain.  
"Thou shalt not" is a kinder sword  
Than from a disappointing God  
"Disciple, call again."*

(Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, 1924.)

Who among us has not wondered at times, as we pray, if God is really listening? Who has not grown weary or despaired in knocking at the same door, with the same request, only to find silence on the other side? Jesus' teaching on prayer carries no such doubts. He is utterly confident that our heavenly Father hears our prayers and answers us.

This assurance is especially important for what we might call aspirational prayer. This kind of prayer expresses a deep desire before God that may take time before it becomes real in our lives. People in

recovery understand aspirational prayer. So do those who face long-term illness or burdensome grief. In aspirational prayer, we pray again and again. We keep on asking. We keep on seeking. We knock again and again. Emily to the contrary, our “long interceding lips” do not perceive our prayer to be a waste of time. This is our heavenly Father. In the very act of asking again and again, in the very process of taking our aspiration to him, we are confident we are heard and will be answered. Palm Sunday brings with it such a confidence in aspirational prayer.

As Jesus rides into Jerusalem on his way to the cross, he is the Father’s answer to his children’s prayers over centuries for a Messiah and Savior. Some saw it exactly as it was. Others were caught up in a revolt against Rome and wanted a revolutionary leader. Many, no doubt, were just at the beginning of a process of aspirational prayer which would have them finally see Jesus as the promised anointed one. Those who were Jews, though, knew the prophecies of Isaiah and Zechariah. They knew the cherished history of prayers for the coming of the Messiah and could not help but wonder.

For us who follow the One on the donkey, we know where he is heading. We do not wonder. We see the Passion before him. And so, once again, we will walk the Way of Sorrows with him. We will listen to him pray deep and hard prayers in the Garden. We will hear his prayerful shouts from the cross. He aspired not to greatness but to service, not to power but to sacrifice. He came to fulfill the aspirational shout, “Hosanna!” by laying down his life to save us all.

This Son of God has taught us to pray just as he prayed, as a child seeking an answer from our heavenly Father. Today, as on the first Palm Sunday, all of our aspirations find their “yes” in Jesus of Nazareth. So, we continue to ask, to seek and to knock, aspiring in prayer to know him and to follow where he leads. Amen.

*Based on a sermon by Dean Nadasdy.  
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