

## Ask, Search, Knock”

7-25-10

“**Ask**, and it will be given you; **search**, and you will find; **knock**, and the door will be opened for you.”

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

I was following a car last week that had a bumper sticker with an encouraging message for me just when I needed it. It stated very boldly that “**God Allows U-turns!**”

I thought to myself, “Well, I’m glad to hear it because I’ve certainly made a few in my life - some voluntary and some not!”

Beyond typical “bumper sticker wisdom,” what struck me was the comforting notion that, given the various paths and directions we can find ourselves on the journey, we have permission to change course. Unlike a favorite book or film, there is no set script or inevitable plot twist that we can be sure of from day to day in this life. We don’t know the way things will go or how the story ends. Some paths just don’t satisfy or seem right and may need a change or a mid-course correction.

**Persistence** is a noble quality that bears fruit but there are times when we must discern the possibility of “starting over” as the best plan of action, given certain realities.

We can get so attached to our goals, expectations and positions and it's hard to "let go" especially if we regard "do-overs" as some form of failure or sign of weakness. It takes courage, humility and, most importantly, God's grace to **surrender** to the unknown and unsure concept of starting anew. Like the metaphor of a stalled car on a railroad track with a train bearing down on it. There comes a time when one must stop trying to restart the engine and run for cover!

Of course, a new direction in life need not be so dramatic or require drastic measures to adjust. It can mean simply taking a break, getting more rest or going for a walk. Anything that may allow for the guiding Spirit to be heard and acknowledged in all that we do.

For most of us these "u-turns," these new beginnings, big or small, are best discerned and achieved through prayer - the daily prayers that take on many forms and are unique to each of us - a kind of "spiritual fingerprint" that distinguishes us, one from another. I've come to realize that much of the best prayer is neither verbal, nor printed on a page, nor in need of language. It occurs whenever we are mindful of God and each other. They are inspired by a range of emotions - from joy to despair, in anxiety and in serenity. Prayer runs the gamut - from the pithy and brief - like the ever-popular "**O my God!**" to the kind that may last for hours while in deep contemplation or meditation.

Luke's gospel has given us wonderful stories over the last several Sundays. We must marvel at the author's deftness

and skill as he relates examples of mission work, neighborliness, “Samaritan compassion” and the dual roles of hospitality in last week’s story of Mary and Martha. What is clear is that “Luke understands something about human psychology” and the universal appeal of these stories.

In today’s passage, Luke addresses the power of a persistent prayer life. Thanks to the devotion and curiosity of Jesus’ disciples, in asking how they should pray - how they may achieve for themselves what they see as so vital for their master - Luke gives us the version of the Lord’s Prayer that we are less familiar with. His is the shorter, sparer one than that from the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew, with some different verbiage that subtly changes some implications – “trespasses” for “sins,” “time of trial” instead of “temptation.” In both instances, here and in Matthew, the simple gift and brilliant message of the prayer are the same.

First, what is striking is **the manner** in which Jesus instructs us to pray. He knows his disciples were not learned or well-born intellectuals. They were regular working men, “ordinary Joe’s,” who left everything behind - their homes their families, their livelihood, in order to follow him (talk about one of life’s “u-turns!”) They **also** wished to connect with their Creator and share in this personal communication using Christ’s words as their model.

Jesus' response to them is amazing! It's revolutionary and radically simple for its time. In examining the prayer, we find the various forms of prayer that have evolved over the centuries, in these short, perfect lines – from **adoration** to **penitence** to **petition**. The whole prayer is an **intercession** because it is meant for “us,” as a group, and not just for “me,” as an individual. It is a prayer for “the people,” not the person.

In contrast to the Jewish tradition of the day, consider also for a moment what he does **NOT** say is necessary in order to converse with God:

- That we need find a priest or other “righteous” person to interpret, translate or advocate.
- That we must get ourselves to the “Holy of Holies” in Jerusalem, or any other consecrated place, in order to be heard.
- That we must purchase an “indulgence” or transact any kind of quid pro quo.
- That we must adorn ourselves in our finest clothes.
- That we wait for a prescribed time such as the Sabbath or high Holy day.
- That we first become an expert in the Law and a student of the prophets.
- That we perform a certain amount “good works” or healing.
- That we offer a sacrifice.
- That we first wound or humble ourselves in the sight of God.

While prayer may inspire some of these things, none of them are prerequisites to an open and honest relationship with God, as evidenced by Jesus' response. Who, where, how, when and what are not at issue. Eligibility for this life of faith does not rest in any of these questions.

What he does instruct us in is a modest prayer that sets God apart **as God** and, at the same time, establishes our kinship to Him. It is here that he makes the bond between the human and the divine - **AND** he does it with two words - "**OUR FATHER.**" These words are not about gender but about the connection of creator and created - of parent to child. At the same time, we acknowledge the "holiness of God" and, at the root of everything, we pray for reconciliation and the realizing of His kingdom both in the world and in ourselves.

The second piece of the prayer moves the focus from the nature of God and His relationship with humanity to practical petitions for "**our daily bread**" - the "bread" that nourishes us, in our immediate needs, along the way. "Bread" that represents so much more than just food for our **bodies** - but the bread for the **mind, spirit** and **soul**, as well.

Next, comes a request for **forgiveness** - interestingly at the top of the list - right after sustenance! The forgiveness of God that heals our brokenness, where we recognize those things that hold us back, hold us down and separate us from God and from each other. As we are forgiven, there we find the strength and grace to

forgive our neighbor in a way that forges new relationships, new realities and allows for those “U-turns” mentioned on that car bumper.

Finally, in asking that we not be brought “**into the time of trial,**” we call on God’s grace to allow us to withstand the temptations that come to all of us, in a fervent plea to increase our joy and lengthen our days.

After the intense and, at times, frustrating preparation of this message for you today, I hope the gift it has offered me is a renewed appreciation for these words Jesus taught us - the Lord’s Prayer in a fresh and renewed way. So often I recite it by rote. It is **so familiar** to us all but we should never take it for granted or allow this familiarity to diminish its’ power and purpose in our prayer life. It is the **foundation** of the whole Gospel. It serves as the starting point for all prayer where Jesus emboldens us to “**ask, search, knock**” and, in the doing so over and over again, we will receive, we will find, we will be admitted and welcomed.

We are given the basis for our **communal worship**, as well as, an open-ended invitation to embark on a **personal journey** with God using the humble action verbs of “asking, searching and knocking.” We proceed as one who does not possess the answers or know the way by using **our voice** in the asking, **our eyes** in the searching and **our hands** in the knocking motivated by what is in **our hearts**. In this week’s message of Good News, Jesus empowers us NOT to blindly follow

direction, mindlessly adhere to doctrine or impose our will on others but to follow him in a quest of discernment and faith.

So, this morning's message is one of both **persistence** and "**do over**" and the wisdom and grace to be able to discern the difference.

When we do this with humility, honesty and steadfastness we will receive, as his parable promises; a fish not a snake, an egg not a scorpion – those things that will enrich us and not frighten us. God's response is like that from a loving parent, without "malice or trickery" but kind and generous.

As we begin a new chapter of our journey together this fall and a time of transition, may we build on what so many have left us, be persistent in our "asking, searching and knocking" and, when necessary, make the occasional "U-turn." May we trust that all will be well and that the Spirit will guide us in all that we do and don't do.

Lastly, may we be bold in our efforts, generous in prayer and rededicated to the miracles and promise that have blessed us thus far, in this place, remembering a line from Robert Browning, that our "reach should always exceed our grasp, or what's a heaven for...?!"

