

“Making the Ask”  
1 Samuel 1:9-20/Matthew 7:7-11

During my high school years, one of my favorite extra-curricular activities was serving on the yearbook staff. I enjoyed the creative process of laying out pages and writing headlines and copy. I enjoyed taking photos, developing them in the school darkroom, and seeing some of those images become part of the final product. I enjoyed the way that every school day I got a break from sitting in a classroom as work on the yearbook took one full class period year-round. It was a great experience and in fact, involved only one aspect I did not enjoy—selling ads.

I was not well suited for that task. When I played Little League baseball, we had to sell raffle tickets each spring. I usually managed to sell about three and after that my parents refused to buy anymore. I was no more enthused years later on learning I had to sell ads for the yearbook, but knew it was required and set out. Each staff member was given a quota. All of us were sent to a few advertisers who were viewed as sure renewals; persons or businesses that had purchased for a number of years and would likely continue. Our quota, however, was higher than the total of those return advertisers meaning we had to generate new revenue as well.

One day, I made a cold call on a photography business near our school. The owner received me warmly, listening to my meager sales pitch in which I probably said something like “You don’t want to buy an ad for our yearbook do you?” He smiled and said, “What size ad do you think I should get?” That was the one response I had not anticipated. “I don’t know,” I mumbled, “maybe a quarter-page?” “Sure,” he replied, “I’ll do that, but you should know if you had suggested a full page I would have purchased that instead.” With visions of my quota being filled with that visit, I jumped in with new enthusiasm. I told him a full page would actually be preferable for a thriving business like his and more appealing for my classmates and their families looking for his services, but it was too late. He would not budge from his first response, thus teaching me a valuable lesson—always leave the selling to the professionals!

In looking back, another takeaway is an encouragement to name what you really hope for and let the other decide if they will accept. It isn’t true only in selling yearbook ads, but matters of the heart and seeking a raise, in building a team of volunteers or closing a deal as in all of them we need to make the ask. Long ago, Jesus proclaimed that was also true of prayer.

Those words come toward the end of his Sermon on the Mount; the address that begins with “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” As that sermon continued, he touched on all kinds of topics and by the point of our reading had spoken about prayer twice; first when he told his followers not to pray like the hypocrites who only want to be seen and then in offering the model we know as the Lord’s Prayer. After sharing that enduring example Jesus proceeded to talk about needless worry and how we are not to judge others before he returns to the subject of how we best communicate with God.

“Ask, and it will be given you,” he says. “Search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” In those three consecutive verbs—ask, search, knock—Jesus is drawing from a Jewish expression of prayer that would have been familiar to his crowd. He goes on to declare that parents know how to give their children the things they need and concludes “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.” In that moment, Jesus affirms that the response to our prayers is always up to God, but clearly calls

on his followers to be bold in their life of prayer; to name what is foremost in their heart. A survey of Americans from three years ago suggests that many of us are following that counsel.

As a Nashville-based group known as Lifeway Research asked about 1100 people in 2014 to tell about the frequency and content of their prayers. It was an online survey which I would think increases candor. Among the results were that we tend to pray more for family and friends than for ourselves, that 42% say they have confessed their sin and 38% have prayed for those affected by natural disaster. 83% believe that God answers at least some of their prayers.

Along with those expected results, it went on to report that 7% of respondents had prayed that they wouldn't get caught while driving too fast and 13% had sought divine intervention with their favorite sports team. My guess is that number would have been higher had it included Philadelphia-area fans! 14% have prayed that God would show vengeance on someone who has hurt them or a loved one, 15% have asked that something they have done which they know would displease God not be uncovered, and 21% of us have prayed to win the lottery. (Smietana, Bob "Americans Pray for Friends and Family, but Rarely for Celebrities of Sports Teams." Lifewayresearch.com, October 1, 2014)

While I would suspect Jesus wasn't thinking about the lottery in offering some prayer instructions long ago, he did encourage us to be bold. Yet I wouldn't be surprised if, even as he spoke those words along the Sea of Galilee, he was thinking about the woman whose narrative we continue to ponder in our reading from First Samuel.

We began the story of Hannah last Sunday when we were reminded of a day she was so upset over the inability to bear children and the torment Elkanah's other wife dished out because of her childless state, that she had stopped eating. Rejecting her husband's attempt at comfort, she goes to the temple in Shiloh and begins to pray. As a woman, Hannah has to stay outside and thus Eli the priest, who is sitting at the entrance, can fully observe her distressed state.

"O LORD of hosts," she prays "if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the time of his death." Nazarites were Jews who devoted their lives to God in service for a set length of time. During that they would not drink alcohol or eat grapes, nor cut their hair. The most famous Nazarite is Samson, the judge of Israel whose strength left him when he revealed to Delilah that cutting his hair would erase his power. Hannah promises God that she would dedicate her son as a Nazarite for his entire life

Her words are made known to the reader, but not heard by Eli as Hannah is praying silently. That was not the norm for prayer in that day and thus as he watches her lips move and observes her physical distress, he concludes she is intoxicated. "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself?" he says. "Put away your wine." "I am pouring out my soul before the LORD," she replies. "I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation..."

Eli responds "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." Hannah returns to the place where her family was staying and begins to eat. "Her countenance was sad no longer," the narrator tells us. The next morning, Elkanah and she go to worship God and then returned home. Soon thereafter, she conceives and months later gives birth to a son. "She named him Samuel," the narrator concludes "for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord.'"

As far as I'm concerned, Hannah offers one of the best Scriptural examples of what Jesus was teaching centuries later. "Ask, and it will be given you," he said. Hannah is very specific about what she wants—not only a child, but a son. "Search and you will find," he continued. In Hannah's case, the peace she experienced came after pouring out her soul in prayer and receiving

a blessing from Eli. “Knock, and the door will be opened for you.” In Hannah’s case, she made a bargain with God, promising to dedicate a son to God as a Nazirite. While it might be tempting to wonder if that kind of promise is what closed the deal, Jesus explains the result in saying “How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” Thus he urges us not to filter our requests to God, but instead to name what we want most of all.

A woman named Diane Cody once wrote about her grandmother who was such a devout Christian that at her death, she was buried in a nun's habit by special order of the Roman Catholic Church. “She had three sons who served during World War II” Diane wrote “my father and his two brothers. Toward the end of the war, two of her sons had come home, but Johnny wasn't home yet. Johnny was a fighter pilot. One day a telegram came that said Johnny had been shot down and was missing in action. Grama Russo read the telegram to everyone, then slowly put on her coat and walked to church. She stayed there day and night for seven days. Her children tried to get her to come home, but she wouldn't. She wouldn't eat either. All she did was pray. On the seventh day, another telegram arrived. Johnny had been found! He was alive and safe and was being sent home. Whenever things aren't going well for me,” Diane concluded, “I think of this story and know that I can get through it.” (*Bits 'n Pieces*, May 22, 1997, pp. 20-21)

“Ask, and it will be given to you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you.” Does Jesus mean that if we ask, we will always receive precisely what we have named? No. Does he mean that God only acts if we ask for help? I don’t hear that as his point either as each of us has received blessings that were not sought, but given by God even so. Yet Jesus was clear that we are to be bold in our petitions, to name what is in our hearts, to make the ask, trusting that the One who knows how to give good things will take it from there.