

17th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Ask Seek Knock”

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I remember when I was five years old on my first visit to Disneyland. I spent the whole day watching my older sister and her friends going on the rides I was not allowed to go on. I could jump up as high as I could and still not reach the height limit on many of the rides. Not understanding why my sister could go on the ride and not me, I spent quite a few moments announcing my disgust. “But Daddy, I want to go on the ride, why can’t I go on the ride like Carolyn.” My Dad, trying to be as patient with me as possible, “No Son, you can’t go on that ride”. “But Daddy!” “You are not old enough for that ride” The atom bomb of parental answers, “you are not old enough”, infallible despite my endless whining. So, I did the most perfectly natural thing a boy of five could do, there was only one possible way out of this misery in the happiest place on earth, I walked a few steps forward, and snuggled her outstretched hand, “Hi Mommy”. After a few moments of buttering her up with cute cuddling, I went for broke. “Mommy can I go on the ride with Carolyn?” Mom, in a kind voice, trying her best to prevent the inevitable meltdown, “No son, not today, but we’ll come back again when you are old enough... can I buy you off with an ice cream?”

Rage overwhelmed me. My parents were in it together, conspiring to destroy my childhood. And the melt down: all that was left was to punish them with my inconsolable screams. Dragging me to a park bench, my Dad, who was usually patient, gave the typical ultimatum any child feared, “Either you knock this off son or I will give you a reason to cry about, right here, in front of everybody, in this happiest place on earth.” That helped reduce me to a whimper. Tigger saved my life. Thank goodness for Tigger, who came bouncing by at the right moment and stuck around until I was perfectly cheered up. My parents then let me go with my sister to the Haunted Mansion, I walked out traumatized.

Over forty years later, I find it helpful to remember that the answer “no” we often got as kids was often the best answer we could have ever received, even if we felt rotten about the answer at the time, or even disagreed with it. Honestly, I think a lot of the problems, addictions, and travesties we get ourselves into as adults could be because there is no one around to tell us “no” when we need it, although the Sacrament of Marriage helps I suppose. As adults though, we have to train ourselves to hear the voice of God resonating through our conscience.

Jesus tells us, “Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will open for you.” There are some problems with this. Ask yourself, if Jesus appeared right before you and asked you, “What do you want me to do for you”, what would you ask? “May I please win the lottery?” How would such a request smack with all the poor and hungry in the world, that I should be handed such luxury? Is it possible the Lord would scratch his head and say “no”, inviting us to be better stewards of the gifts we have already and everything will be fine?

Of course we could ask in all holiness, “Lord would you please feed all the hungry in the world?” That is a better request. However, is it possible the Lord would lovingly say, “That is a very good thing for you to do! There is certainly enough food in the world. You have my blessing”. The point here is, when it comes to asking the Lord for favors, be careful what you ask for!

You see, we do not see the world the same way God sees it. God stands at the fullness of time, he sees all the possible roads our lives and even the universe can take, and he gives us the freedom of will to walk with Him along our journey or travel our path alone. I believe God has the best road in mind for us, and tries to communicate that to us at critical junctures in our lives. Because he values our free will, I believe God is also content with other possible roads our lives may travel, just as I believe God is not content with the many other roads we could venture. God, at times, says no...and we better listen. With God, however, there is always grace for souls who sincerely seek Him. And so Jesus tells his disciples, “Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds, and everyone who knocks the door will be opened.” Everyone. The problem is God will answer in ways we may not always like, but are nevertheless the best answer for us.

We therefore arrive at objection number 1. “But wait Father, this is all sounding great and everything, but I have been praying a long time about that something awful that happened to me, to my family member, my friend, my community, etc. It says a Father wouldn’t give a child a scorpion, so why does he give us cancer, how about joblessness, how about my situation that I am dealing with right now?” I get this question a lot. I suspect if, as a five year old in the theme park, if I could have gathered a bunch of other five year olds, maybe we could have come up with a consensus with what our parents were up to. Today, the Holy Spirit gives us Sacred Scripture and Tradition to go on, while philosophers and theologians parade around God’s throne like preschoolers with diplomas. I feel that way at times, myself.

It is safe to say God does not want suffering in the world, but the scary, scary thing is, he sure does allow it, doesn’t he, as surely as he allowed his Son to die on the Cross for our benefit and the salvation of the world. It is from this theology of the cross that we can paraphrase St. Paul a bit as he contemplates our mortality: God allows suffering so that greater good can come of it, even if we can’t see it. God allows suffering so that greater good can come of it. This can be a very scary answer, especially if your name is Job. On the other hand, if we see life as a preparation for everlasting life, even our mortality can be an opportunity to grow in love of God and the people around us. I think precisely because our time is short we can love with such intensity. This helps us to heaven.

A good example of this is Saint Teresa of Calcutta. She sure saw the good of her hospice ministry in the faces of the dying and forgotten, while others usually looked at the same faces and kept walking. Faced with an incurable diagnosis of Parkinson Disease, Saint John Paul II saw an opportunity for evangelization, to witness to others the power of redemptive suffering, while others might have decided to despair. Do you think

that Mother Teresa or Pope John Paul II didn't pray for cures to awful diseases? Of course they did. They accepted the answer they received, however, and gave thanks to God, even in disappointment.

But we are, of course, young children in the eyes of heaven, it is quite difficult to comprehend in this theme park called life that, from God's perspective and the perspective of the angels and saints, all time and space is the eternal now. From God's perspective salvation has already been won, the artwork that is all of creation is complete, the eternal Jerusalem, so to speak, is established. The author of *Amazing Grace* challenges us with this heavenly perspective, "When we have been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun, we have no less days to sing thy praise than when we first begun." That is the viewpoint, the lens that gives us perspective. Even through the veil of tears that blinds us of the eternal now, God still operates from that perspective. If we can catch glimpses of that perspective in faith as we make our life journey, how happier we can be.

But this brings us to objection number 2. "But Father, my prayers are simply not getting answered. I pray I pray I pray and I don't hear anything. What's wrong with me?" I hear this question a lot. I believe there can be many reasons why we are not hearing God's voice. One reason could be: we are not open to an answer that is contrary to what we want. What we have been talking about. We haven't accepted that "no" is an answer too and that from that "no" can become a world of "yeses". Or as Garth Brooks put it, some of life's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.

A second reason that God isn't answering our prayers is because, although God wants what we want, it just isn't the right time yet. This is common for singles that are looking for Mr. or Mrs. Right. I can't tell you how many times I have had a young adult confront me with "Father, God is not listening, I keep praying for the right relationship and I only to get duds." A year or two later many have come back and said, "Father you were right, those duds helped me mature and get me ready for the person I am supposed to be with, I am engaged now, will you perform the marriage?" You see, God always operates in the fullness of time, not a minute before.

A third reason God isn't answering a prayer could be because God trusts you with the decision, he made you after all, gave you free will, spiritual gifts and a conscience. Remember that this life is a training ground. God wants us to have the credit for good choices. I have found that this question is common with young men and women who wonder if God is calling them to seminary, religious or to married life. Door one or Door two, etc. Even if God might have a preference, God sometimes sits back and says, "Those are great choices for you, both choices are rooted in love and love after all is the ultimate choice, why I created you, choose well".

A 4th reason God isn't answering a prayer may be because we are not living a holy life. Wrapped in sin, our prayers may reach God but God's answers could come back indiscernible to us, like static, the message blocked by the thickness of our egos.

Of course, another reason why we don't hear God's answers is because we are not asking the right questions. Remember, it's God you're talking to, if He thinks you already know the answer his response will be a quiet smile. As in, "Lord should I exercise more and eat more vegetables?" Quiet smile.

A big reason why we don't hear God answer is because we do not take enough time to listen. How often in our prayer lives are we all talk, talk, talk. We don't train our souls to be silent, train our souls to hear the voice of God, a voice that in my experience rarely chooses words but rather speaks with a vocabulary far deeper... the mysterious language of the heart. When the Lord says, ask, seek and knock, he means it. We simply need to learn to be quiet, listen and translate the answer.

Now let's go back to the happiest place on earth, a child of five. At the end of the very long day, and I had a very good day all in all, we all gathered for the fireworks show. Even though they have fireworks shows most nights, this one was special and it was very crowded. If memory is serving me right, it was the fourth of July. The trouble was...I didn't know anything about fireworks at this point in my young life. As soon as the "booms" and "pows" began, it was like a war zone for me, I screamed, and hit the ground to take cover. They weren't going to take me alive.

The problem was the place we were standing was filled with people and there was a lot of movement. I lost sight of my parents. I was lost. And boy did I panic. I screamed and screamed, I cried out Mommy and Daddy. And then another "pow" and "bang" from the fireworks, I screamed again, ducking for cover. I thought I was going to die, I was lost and I was convinced that I would never see my family again. And that is of course how my Mom found me, curled up on the ground with my arms wrapped around the ankle of a perfect stranger who was losing circulation because of my death grip. My Mom managed to pry my arms off of the poor gentleman's leg and pick me up. I quickly embraced her and cried. What really stuck with me, however, is that my Mom had been crying too. She was just as frightened as I was about my disappearance.

Now, from a theological perspective, I think God is an awful lot like my Mom at that moment. As individuals and as a human race, we know what it means to be lost and grasping in panic to something that isn't God. In those times, with the passionate heart of a parent, how God searches and searches for us. Or as the Apostle John put it, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." How encouraging indeed to hear the Lord's words: "Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. Knock, the door will open."