

SERMON: Sunday – 24 July 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Don't Give Up. ASK.

Luke 11:1-13

I had a delicate situation to deal with this week. It was really a very small thing but it could've exploded into something much bigger. It needed to be dealt with. It began with someone feeling fearful that their end of an agreement was possibly not being rightly upheld. And so they decided to do something about it which rubbed a few people up the wrong way.

Fear can cause that. It can make us do the wrong thing. It can lead to conflict in relationships or even war between nations.

Anyway, I prayed about it and in the silence a word came - as often happens in prayer when we sit and wait in silence and then we just know. It doesn't always happen but it often does.

God speaks in our silence. The Holy Spirit whispers in the quieted soul.

I just knew how to respond to this person who was fearful and somewhat angry. I knew how to respond in a way which not only would diffuse the situation but actually transform it into a growing experience that would allow the relationships involved to improve rather than get worse. The right words came, not out of my own cleverness, but through a prompting in the heart.

The morning after, I was sitting in the quiet and read a poem that someone had sent me earlier in the day. Here's what it said.

There is no scarcity.
There is no shortage.
No lack of love,
of compassion, of joy in the world.
There is enough.
There is more than enough.
Only fear and greed make us think otherwise.
No one need starve.
There is enough land and enough food.
No one need die of thirst.
There is enough water. No one
need live without mercy.
There is no end to grace.
And we are all instruments of grace.
The more we give it, the more we share it, the more we use it,
the more God makes.

There is no scarcity of love.
There is plenty.
And always more.
(Rachel E. Harding)

Its so easy to give up on prayer. But in a sense, prayer never gives up on us.

We might find prayer hard but God doesn't give up on us.

We might think that we're no good at prayer or that its too difficult.

I suppose it all depends on what we understand by prayer. What is prayer and how do we pray?

When asked by his disciples how to pray, Jesus gave them a form of words to use but perhaps more importantly, he encouraged them to persevere with prayer, to not give up.

Like disturbing the friend in the parable; even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

Anything to keep the peace, to get back to bed, for this so called friend is keeping me awake with his persistent asking.

Ask, and it will be given to you; 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.

I think we often find prayer difficult because we don't ask, don't seek, don't knock. Rather, we bottle up our requests and keep them to ourselves. Or we seek our own solutions, which often fail or lead to frustration, anger, resentment.

If God really is a good father then why don't we behave like the children we are? Why don't we ask fully expecting our requests to be made?

We often hear the caveat, that we should preface our requests with if it be your will God. People have told us that not everything is good for us or that what we are asking for might not fit in with God's timing.

I'm not saying I believe these things to not be true. No good parent would consent to buying their child a gun to take to school to sort out the classroom bully for example. At least I hope they wouldn't.

No wise parent would let their child watch TV all day whilst spoon feeding them a diet of crisps, chocolate and ice cream.

To paraphrase Jesus, we who are evil, know how to give good gifts to our children. We know what they desire and we know what's good for them.

How much more then will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

Such prayer is about connecting with the God who is already intimately connected with us, ready to speak into our silence or assure us of his love for us and for creation.

And even difficult circumstances don't mean we can't experience this love in prayer.

Etty Hillesum was a Dutch woman imprisoned in Westerbork Concentration Camp during the WW2. We have her diaries and here is an extract.

You have made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised toward Your heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in my bed and rest in You, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer. I have been terribly tired for several days, but that too will pass. Things come and go in a deeper rhythm, and people must be taught to listen; it is the most important thing we have to learn in this life. I am not challenging You, oh God, my life is one great dialogue with You. I may never become the great artist I would really like to be, but I am already secure in You, God. Sometimes I try my hand at turning out small profundities and uncertain short stories, but I always end up with just one single word: God. And that says everything, and there is no need for anything more. And all my creative powers are translated into inner dialogues with You. The beat of my heart has grown deeper, more active, and yet more peaceful, and it is as if I were all the time storing up inner riches.

[Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941–1943*; and *Letters from Westerbork*]

Surely that is the point of prayer, to discover such love in the depth of the soul, and for it to overflow from within into all around.

Richard Rohr has said this about prayer,

People who know God well—mystics, hermits, those who risk everything to find God—always meet a lover, not a dictator. God is never found as an abusive father or a tyrannical mother; God is always a lover greater than we dared hope for. How different from the “account manager” most people seem to worship. God is the lover who receives and forgives everything. When we go into the Presence, we find someone not against us, but someone who is definitely for us! Mystics recognise someone else is holding them. People who pray always say, “Someone is for me more than I am for myself.” Prayer is being loved at a deep, sweet level. I hope everyone has felt such intimacy alone with God. I promise it is available to all. Maybe a lot of us just need to be told that this is what we should expect and seek. We’re afraid to ask for it; we’re afraid to seek. It feels presumptuous. We can’t trust that such a love exists. But it does.

So why not ask? Let’s ask together, in song.

Song - If you believe and I believe, and we together pray, the HS will come down and set God’s people free. Free to be.

Dora will now say a few word about what this looks like in practise.