

HE WHO SEEKS, FINDS

Psalm 6; Luke 11:1-13

Psalm 6

¹ Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
² Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint;
heal me, Lord, for my bones are in
agony.
³ My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, Lord, how long?
⁴ Turn, Lord, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing
love.
⁵ Among the dead no one proclaims your
name.
Who praises you from the grave?

⁶ I am worn out from my groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.
⁷ My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.
⁸ Away from me, all you who do evil,
for the Lord has heard my weeping.
⁹ The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;
the Lord accepts my prayer.
¹⁰ All my enemies will be overwhelmed
with shame and anguish;
they will turn back and suddenly be put
to shame.

Luke 11:2-11

¹ One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."
² He said to them, "When you pray, say:
"Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread.
⁴ Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation."
⁵ Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' ⁷ And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.
⁹ "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.
¹¹ "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?"

MESSAGE:

The American playwright Tennessee Williams once said that life was like carnival music heard from a distance: on the surface it is full of fun and excitement, but beneath all the

gaiety, there is a certain sadness. Another 20th-century writer, the Irish novelist D. H. Lawrence, said after visiting our country that the superficial voice of America was, “Build! Build! Build!” but that there was an underlying voice saying, “Destroy! Destroy! Destroy!” It reminds me of my four-year-old grandson who loves to make buildings and towers out of lego blocks, but loves even more to smash them to bits once he’s assembled them.

Today we live in a society which is both building and destroying. We’ve achieved unparalleled prosperity, yet suffer from a 55% divorce rate. Our economic performance and productivity keep improving, but concepts like “honor” and “sin” are looked upon as relics of the past. We deluge our children with toys and rarely get them to Sunday School. We work hard and play hard all day and then lie in our beds at night wondering what it all means and worrying about how long it can last. There are a lot of people in America whose lives are like carnival music: superficial and gay on the outside, but fearful and unsure on the inside. They are like Richard Cory, a man in a poem who cut a fine figure on horseback and who everyone admired and then went home one day and put a bullet in his head. As Henry David Thoreau said, *“Most men live lives of quiet desperation.”*

King David appears to have been such a man. His life had consisted of one success after another. As a boy he had become a legend by killing the giant Goliath. Later, as a young man, he became king of Israel, uniting all twelve tribes under his leadership and establishing Jerusalem as the capital of a mighty empire. To this day, Jerusalem is called the “city of David.” Not only was he a great warrior and military commander, he was also a gifted poet and musician. Most important of all, by God’s own accounting he was a “man after the Lord’s own heart.” God looked after David. He protected him, gave him victory after victory in battle, settled him on his throne, forgave his sins and helped him succeed in whatever he undertook to do. In sum, David had it all—everything it took to make a man happy: the love and favor of God and the admiration and loyalty of his fellow man.

But listen to these words of David: *“Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?...I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow.”* (Psalm 6:2-3, 6-7) Do these sound like the words of a happy man? David’s accomplishments—his power, his possessions—even his faith couldn’t keep him happy. Something was making David miserable.

His son, Solomon, suffered from the same problem. He was the wisest man who ever lived and was blessed with abundant wealth and power. Yet he summarized his life this way when he was old: *“Meaningless! Meaningless! Says the Teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless! I, the Teacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”* (Eccl. 1: 2, 12-14). Something made Solomon miserable.

What is this “something” in life that seems to bend us inexorably toward sorrow? There is a simple answer to that question: the answer is sin. Sin led David to lust, coveting, adultery,

deception and murder. Sin led Solomon to promote pagan worship in Israel. Sin brings misery into people's lives. Why? Because God designed us to live in a close relationship with Him and sin keeps us from doing that. By sinning, we put up barriers between ourselves and the Only One who can give us lasting joy and peace. The result is that we spend much of our lives separating ourselves from God, living like strangers in a strange land, inhabitants of a foreign country which we keep pretending is our home.

Now, do you want to hear the real kicker? **Christians suffer more from this than unbelievers do!** That's right—Christians feel the pain of being separated from God more keenly than non-Christians do. This is why Paul agonizes over his continued sinning in *Chapter 7 of the Book of Romans*: *"I do not understand what I do...For the good that I would do I do not do, but the evil that I hate, I keep on doing...Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death!" (Romans 7:15ff.)* Paul knows that his sinning comes between him and God, and that God is the only source of life and joy—yet he cannot stop sinning. As the bumper sticker says: "Christians don't stop sinning—they just stop enjoying it."

You see, when we were baptized, the Holy Spirit came to dwell in us. Then he went to work in us, showing us our sins and pointing us to the One who paid the penalty for them and set us free of their power. Still, we persist in sinning because we are saddled with this "flesh" this "sinful nature"—our "old man" as Paul calls him who will continue to dog us with temptations and draw us into sinning as long as we inhabit this earth. And we hate that. We long to be rid of him, but we won't be – not until we die and put him in the grave. And knowing our sin, which we hate, we can only imagine the sheer joy of being "shet of it" as we used to say in Missouri. And this discrepancy between the prospect of a heavenly existence untainted by sin and our present enslavement to sinning—which is no less than the difference between heaven and hell—is what torments us. We know how good things could be—and one day will be—and that makes how they are all the harder to deal with.

Consider, for example, divorce. For two unbelievers who have hardened their hearts against God, a divorce may amount to little more than a readjustment of lifestyles, an amicable correction of a mutual error in judgment. (This assumes, of course, that they bothered to get married in the first place.) The two go their separate ways, wishing each other well, and calling it good. But for two Christians who believe that in marriage God has joined them together as one flesh and that what He has joined together man must not separate, divorce is tearing apart what God has knit together. Divorce is amputation, evisceration, agony. Both parties are forced to see and feel the ugliness of their own sin as they are shown the fruit of their hardened hearts.

So what are we to do? We who have been chosen to receive the gift of God's love in Christ Jesus, who are appointed to be salt and light in a dark and tasteless world yet who are at war with ourselves and agonize along with Paul over the sin that rages in us—what are we to do?

Why we do what believers have always done: we call on the Lord! We plead with Him to strengthen us and encourage us. We ask Him to help us persevere as believers and witnesses until He takes us home to be with Him. In short, we go to prayer, trusting in God's promise in today's Gospel lesson: *"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* (Luke 11:9-13)

What a marvelous promise! We have a God who urges us to seek Him—and who delights in being found! Now, given that promise—and God cannot lie—why are we so reluctant to pray? We are, you know. Most Christians have a hard time disciplining themselves into spending time each day in prayer. Why do you suppose this is? Well, first of all, praying is work—asking, seeking, knocking—and like any other job we put it off because we're lazy. Second, we're afraid that we won't find God when we do pray. We simply don't trust His promise. That's usually because once we had a disappointing prayer experience. We prayed for something and we didn't get it or it didn't happen. So, we reason, why pray? God won't give you what you want anyway. Well, sometimes that's true. Like any good parent, God knows that not everything we want is good for us and when that's the case he doesn't give it to us. But the real reason is that God is not so much interested in changing our circumstances as he is ***in changing us***. Like any good parent, His goal is not to keep us happy and content, but to help us grow up in our faith so that we can be more like Christ, who was *"...the firstborn among many brothers."* (Romans 8:29) And growing up always involves pain.

And that leads us to the third, the most daunting reason we don't pray: we're not so much afraid that we won't find God in our prayers as we are that we ***will*** find Him and that when we do, He will change us. And that scares us because the truth of the matter is that we would rather remain the way we are—sins and all. After all, we've spent a lifetime engineering these personalities we have and why would we want to change them? The sins we have may be ugly but they're our sins and we wouldn't have clung to them as long as we have if we didn't secretly love them. Give them up? Not likely! Or perhaps we should say, not easily.

But that's what God offers to those who are bold enough to seek Him in prayer. He offers to change us from what we are into someone we can't begin to imagine: a brother or sister of Christ.

Ask and it will be given; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.

Amen.