

Knocking on Heaven's Door

Colossians 2:6-15

As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

Luke 11:1-13

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given 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. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

In his 1998 motion picture, *The Apostle*, Robert Duvall plays the character of Sonny, a pious but deeply flawed preacher who, in a fit of jealous rage, kills his wife’s lover. He leaves town, jettisons his automobile with the Texas plates that read “SONNY,” and tries to start a new life. In the film’s most memorable scene, Sonny wades into a lake and prepares to baptize himself as an apostle. “With great humility,” he begins, “I ask permission to be accepted as an apostle of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of Nazareth. And with your gracious permission, I wish to be baptized as an apostle of our Lord.”

With arms upraised, Sonny submerges himself beneath the waters of God's forgiveness.

Today's Gospel lesson is all about asking. "Ask, and it will be given you," Jesus said, "seek, 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." Jesus continues by reviewing several ludicrous scenarios – a child asking for an egg and given a scorpion instead, or asking for a halibut and given a copperhead – designed to underscore the fact that we, as God's children, have a special claim on the Almighty's generosity.

But nowhere in the New Testament do we find Jesus foisting himself on others, even at the moment of his death, suspended between two thieves. "Do you want to be healed?" he asks, again and again throughout his ministry. The Father, he says, eagerly bestows the blessing of faith or the gift of healing.

But we must ask, Jesus tells us, and ask boldly. Just as a mother wants to give good gifts to her children, so too God wants to lavish good gifts on his children. Ask boldly. "I've always called you Jesus," Sonny cries out in his pain, "you've always called me Sonny." As Sonny's mother explains to a midnight caller who had been awakened by his prayers, "Sometimes Sonny talks to the Lord, and sometimes he yells at the Lord," she says. "Tonight, he just happens to be yelling at him." Ask boldly.

But what is it that we ask? The young immediately think of material things. When I was a child, I asked God for a baseball mitt, which I eventually purchased – an Ernie Broglie model – from the Sears-Roebuck catalog for the impossible sum of two dollars and sixty-seven cents. As we get older, our prayers bend in the direction of our children and eventually toward issues of health – for ourselves and for our loved ones.

There's nothing wrong with those petitions. "Ask, and it will be given you," Jesus said. But prayers of this sort miss the larger point. This

passage – and all of the New Testament – suggests that the one thing we should seek is faith itself, the ability to believe. For that is the greatest of all gifts: the ability, in this life, to affirm Jesus as Lord.

Easier said than done. My favorite declaration in the New Testament is the plaintive cry from the father of a young man. “I believe,” he says to Jesus. “Help my unbelief.” And there again, the passage suggests that the man needed help to believe; he wasn’t able to seize it, to lock it down, on his own. “I believe; help my unbelief.”

“I believe. Help my unbelief.” “Ask, and it will be given you.” As Flannery O’Connor says, quoting St. Matthew, “the violent bear it away.”

More than a quarter of a century ago, as I was nearing the completion of my graduate studies, I walked into the departmental lounge one Monday morning to find a faculty member seated there, sipping his coffee, with a broad smile on his face.

“Vic, you look different!” I blurted out before I had the chance to consider my words.

Victor Preller was a philosopher – and a very good one. I had taken a seminar with him a couple of years earlier on philosophy of religion, in the course of which he had derived obvious satisfaction – *delight* is probably too strong a word – in refuting any claims that religion might have to truth. He inhabited the universe of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Friedrich Nietzsche and Hans-Jorg Gadamer.

“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit,” St. Paul writes in today’s epistle. Victor Preller most definitely had been taken captive.

Vic had once been a Catholic priest and also an Episcopal priest. But he had long ago discarded the faith, and he now considered it quaint and vaguely amusing that anyone would call himself a Christian. He

was a kind man, congenial in his own way. But there was a darkness to his countenance, a brooding restlessness, a palpable unhappiness.

But on that Monday morning, he was smiling. “What happened, Vic?” I asked.

And out spilled the story, the tale of his miserable life – the sadness, the loneliness, the existential struggles, the lost faith – and how, during the weekend just past, he had reached the end of his rope. “I realized,” he told me solemnly, “it was either suicide or faith.”

He chose faith.

And, oh, what a transformation! The greyness was gone, and his face was positively luminous. If ever I needed proof of the transformative power of Jesus, I had it that Monday morning. And this was no fluke. Victor’s intellectual prowess was undiminished, and he continued his distinguished career as a philosopher. I’m sure that he, like all of us, still entertained doubts about the faith from time to time, but he returned to the church and assisted for the remaining years of his life at All Saints Episcopal Church on Princeton’s west side.

He was a new man, a man of faith. Like the neighbor in today’s Gospel, he had knocked on the door at midnight, and someone answered. “Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find.”

One of the things I love most about the Bible is the Almighty’s fondness for scoundrels, for flawed human beings like Sonny and Vic Preller. Moses was pretty much a coward. David, the adulterer, we read, was a man after God’s own heart. Saul, a Jew of the Jews and a persecutor of Christians, became the world’s greatest apostle. Peter was spineless, a blowhard who sank like a rock beneath the waves of the Sea of Galilee. But Jesus elected to build his church around flawed beings like Peter.

Jacob stole his brother’s birthright, wrestled with God or an angel or someone out there in the darkness, and came away with a limp. The violent bear it away.

All of these scoundrels cried out to God in their distress – in their guilt, their loneliness, their abandonment – and came away with the gift of faith, the ability to believe. They persisted in the face of what seemed like divine indifference; the door was opened.

In the movie *The Apostle*, Sonny, like so many converts in the Bible – Abram to Abraham, Saul to Paul – took a new name when he plunged beneath the waters of baptism. After Vic Preller’s encounter with Jesus, everyone in the department – those who believed and those who didn’t – began addressing him as *Victor*, his given name.

I’m not sure we even realized we were doing so. *Victor!*

The words of Jesus beckon us to faith, but there’s nothing here that suggests passivity on our part. He calls us to knock on heaven’s door, at midnight, if need be – no, *pound* on heaven’s door! – and demand the gift of faith, the ability to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. “Ask, and it will be given you.” Not a faith devoid of doubt, for if doubt has been banished, what need have we for faith? But faith in the midst of doubt, belief in the face of unbelief. “Seek, and you will find.” Seize it boldly.

And then the promise: “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Victor didn’t say on that Monday morning whether he, like Sonny, yelled at the Lord during his dark night of the soul when he teetered between suicide and faith. But I wouldn’t be surprised if he had. “Ask, and it will be given you.” Shout, if need be.

The violent bear it away.

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Christ Church

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