

## IT IS WHAT IT IS

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Grace Church in New York  
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Jesus said, “*Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*” (Luke 11:9)

History turns on a dime, and sometimes the proverbial dime can be just one little word. Much in the news these days is the criminal Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February of this year. But conflict in the region is hardly new. Back in the 1850s the British, French, and Ottoman Empires fought the Russians for control the Crimean Peninsula. At the Battle of Balaclava, the Earl of Cardigan was in charge of a British unit called “the Light Brigade.” Cardigan received orders to “charge the guns.” But which guns? What did Cardigan’s superiors mean by guns? What the order referred to was a lightly armed Russian position behind a small hill in the valley. But the only Russian guns Cardigan could see were a heavily armed battalion across the entire valley. It would be suicide to charge those guns, but an order was an order. The Light Brigade charged and hundreds of soldiers died. “Someone had blundered,” wrote Alfred, Lord Tennyson in his famous poem. One little word was the culprit.

In the summer of 1945 it was clear that the Empire of Japan could not win World War Two. To bring the war to a close the Allies drafted the Potsdam Declaration, calling for the complete and unconditional surrender of Japan. Failure to accept the terms would result in prompt and utter destruction. The Japanese response included the word “mokusatsu,” which is hard to translate into English. It can mean either “considering” or “ignoring.” The Allies took the Japanese to mean the latter, as in, “we are ignoring the proposal.” Thus, Truman gave the order to drop the atomic bomb.<sup>1</sup> One little word.

Finally, earlier this year the Rev. Matthew Hood, a young Roman Catholic priest, was watching a video of his own infant baptism that his father had filmed. Suddenly Hood realized something was terribly wrong. The officiant performing the rite had tinkered with the baptismal formula, saying “we baptize you,” instead of “I baptize you.” Believe it or not, the Vatican has declared “we” baptisms to be invalid. Therefore, since Hood’s baptism wasn’t valid in the eyes of his church, his ordination as a priest was nullified as well. Thus every Eucharist he had celebrated, every wedding he had blessed, every sin he had absolved, every sacramental act he had performed was void. Hood was quickly baptized and ordained using the correct forms. Now he spends a good bit of his time chasing down the couples whose vows he had blessed, asking if they’d like the real sacramental thing. My point is not to criticize another branch of Christianity. Rather, it is to highlight that one little word – this time we instead of I – can turn history on a dime, and even call into question the state of your eternal soul.

Today we have heard in the Gospel of Luke how Jesus tried to teach his disciples about prayer. Prayer is something that interests just about everybody, because just about everybody prays – even atheists. Bertrand Russell was a British philosopher who did not believe in God or an afterlife. “When I die, I rot,” he famously wrote. Yet on his own death bed Bertrand Russell asked a friend to pray with him. So reports Donald Coggan, the 100<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>2</sup> Thus it is only the rare person who abandons the hope that we can commune with God. But even though most people pray, prayer is an intensely private subject. People would rather speak of just about anything else. Yet still we yearn to be better at prayer. We crave the connection with God which is prayer.

The disciples of Jesus also wanted to do better with their prayers. Day after day they saw Jesus deep in prayer – intimately communicating with God – sometimes for hours at a stretch. Here was an experience they wanted for themselves, so one day they overcame their inhibitions and they said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Teach us to speak with God; teach us to hear God; teach us to pray. In answer to their request, Jesus first taught the disciples what we have come to call The Lord’s Prayer. Today we say the Lord’s Prayer at every single service of the church. We say it in every conceivable situation, for every conceivable human need. This is rightly so, because it’s the one prayer that Jesus literally taught us to say. In the two-thousand years since the time of Jesus, every line, every word of the Lord’s Prayer, has inspired more sermons than you can probably count. So today, I’m not going to add yet another sermon on the Lord’s Prayer.

Next, Jesus told the disciples a parable to illustrate what prayer should be like. Think about prayer this way, Jesus said: You receive an unexpected guest at midnight, and you have no food to spare. So what you do is go to the house next door where your friend lives – where your friend is sleeping. You pound on the door, you wake up your friend, and say, “Friend, lend me three loaves.” Because of your brazen persistence – certainly not because of your friendship – your neighbor gets up and gives you what you need. So with the parable, Jesus taught the disciples to persist in prayer. Persist in prayer as the midnight caller persists. Persist in prayer as Abraham persisted with God in pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah. Persist in prayer.

Finally, Jesus said some things about prayer that have become second only to The Lord’s Prayer in familiarity: “*Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*” This is what I want to spend some time on today because I wonder if we have misinterpreted one little word in the teaching. Jesus has said one thing, and we have heard an entirely different thing. One little word is the culprit, and the word is “it.” Ask and it will be given you. What do you think Jesus meant by the word it? What is it that is ours for the asking? What is it that will be opened to us?

Before we go on let me admit that I may be among the few people who don’t know what it is. Everywhere you go people are talking about it. You may happen to be a sports fan. If you are you will hear athletes of every sort give postgame interviews from the field or the locker room. Reporters will ask inane and annoying questions: How does this losing streak make you feel? Tell us about that strike out, that blown call? How about that fading hope that kicks in every year about this time that your team will be playing in the post-season? The athletes will hem and haw. Then, summoning all the wisdom at their disposal, will eventually say, “Well, it is what it is.” As far as answers go, it’s profound. It’s philosophical. It may even be theological. But what is it that is what it is? Perhaps I need to read more books. Last week I noted two titles on the New York Times Best Sellers list. Near the top of the various fiction categories was one novel named *The It Girl*, and a second called *It Ends With Us*. What is it? What did Jesus mean by this one little word? Perhaps when Jesus tells us to ask for it, it can be whatever you want it to be.

Our Old Testament reading for today (Genesis 18:20-33) is about people who were really asking for it, and got it. Do you know the story behind the humorous dialogue we heard between God and Abraham? The residents of Sodom and Gomorrah were living their lives in pursuit of it all. But because their means of getting it included murder and mayhem in astonishing proportions, God sent two angels into Sodom to see what was really happening. Would they find even ten righteous people? Apparently not. Things in the city were worse than anyone thought. At night the angels had to hide in Lot’s house from an unruly mob. From inside the angels warned the mob, “you’re really asking for it (Genesis 19:11)!” From outside the mob pounded on the door and shouted, “Yes we are. Now let us have it (Genesis 19:4-5).” And you know the rest of the story: God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. So you see the problem of asking for it. God may really let you have it.

Forgive my semi-creative paraphrase of the larger context behind the Genesis reading. Yes, God let them have it, but the more pressing spiritual problem for us is that often it seems God won't let us have it. In our prayers we ask for it. In our prayers we ask for peace of mind, peace on earth, or just a piece of bread. We ask God for healing from a deadly disease, rescue in time of danger, relief from remorse, love and companionship, or some measure of success in life. It's no secret that lots of good people pray unceasingly for these things. But what they pray for is not what God gives them, and as a result their faith falters and founders. This is why I wonder if we have misinterpreted what Jesus meant by it. When he said, *Ask, and it will be given to you*, he meant one thing. But for reasons that are understandable, reasons that are desperate, reasons that are perhaps selfish, we have taken him to mean another thing.

So the question before us is simply this: What is it that God will give us? I can only tell you what Jesus said. At the end of Gospel reading today he spells it right out: *"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!"* (Luke 11:13) The Holy Spirit is what God promises to give us. The Holy Spirit is what he means by that one little word, it. Now you may be quietly thinking, "Oh that. More church talk." But I have found that God's gift of the Holy Spirit is more real in my life than a lot of fancy theological jargon. And I speak to you as one who has done plenty of midnight pounding on God's door, asking for desperate favors, understandable favors, selfish favors, silly favors, daily favors. Sometimes my prayers actually seem to be in tune with God's mysterious purposes. Sometimes my prayers aren't even close, and a week, or a month, or perhaps a year or two later I'm on my knees thanking God for not letting me have it. Other times I don't understand why God doesn't grant some requests. I don't think I ever will. But then, God is God, and we are not. Or perhaps I should say, God is God and I am not. (Watch out for that one little word!)

Out of the crucible of praying – out of all the asking, repenting, praising, thanking, even listening – out of all the midnight frustrations, sunrise blessings, and all the gray area in between comes the gift of the Holy Spirit. What is the Holy Spirit? It is God's abiding presence, God's friendship, God's love, God with us so that neither death nor life nor anything in all creation will be able to undo us. The more I pray, the more I become aware of it – it being God's living presence and companionship. The more we are aware of God's presence, the more we are ready to live as God's people.

Prayer opens the door upon which the Lord of life is knocking. Persevere in prayer. Persevere in prayer as you would persevere in conversation in your closest human relationship. Persevere in prayer, not so that God finally hears you, but rather so that you finally hear God. Never give up. Never stop asking. Never stop seeking. Feel free to rage at God. Listen. Repent. Try again. Offer thanks. Sing praise to the Lord. This is all prayer. Out of it all you will discover it. Or shall we say, out of it all you will discover what St. Paul described as "the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."

Here's a final thought. When Moses asked God what his name was, God replied, "I am who I am (Exodus 3:14)." As for the Holy Spirit, today we say "it is what it is." *"Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and (the Holy Spirit) will be opened unto you."*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lederer, "How One Word Misinterpreted Can Change the World." The San Diego Union Tribune, August 1, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Coggan, Great Words of the Christian Faith, Abingdon, 1978, p. 71.