

Asking for the Spirit

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Exodus 33:12-23 NRSV

Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.” The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”

And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

Luke 11:9-13

[Once, on the subject of prayer, Jesus said to his disciples,] I tell you also: Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. Because everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds, and to everyone who knocks it will be opened. Which of you fathers, whose son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead of a fish? Or, if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you know how to give good gifts to your children, though you are evil, how much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit from heaven to those who ask him?

Heidelberg Catechism

116Q. Why do Christians need to pray?

- A.** Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us.
And also because God gives his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly, asking God for these gifts and thanking God for them.

Children's Story

Simon the Squirrel is Sammy's favorite uncle. Ever since Sammy was a little squirrel, his family would go to visit Uncle Simon. And whenever they visited, Uncle Simon always had a little something to give to Sammy. Once Uncle Simon gave Sammy an acorn whistle. Another time he gave him a maple-leaf pinwheel. Little gifts like that made every visit to Uncle Simon special.

But little gifts from Uncle Simon stopped not too long ago. And visits to Uncle Simon stopped too. That was okay with Sammy, though, because Uncle Simon had come to live with Sammy and his family.

These days Uncle Simon never has "a little something" to give to Sammy. No. These days what Uncle Simon gives to Sammy is himself. He shows Sammy how to blow an acorn whistle really loud. He teaches Sammy how to make maple-leaf pinwheels. And he tells Sammy stories about the old days of the Great Forest.

Simon the Squirrel is Sammy's favorite uncle, because he's with Sammy every day.

Sermon

Maybe I'm missing something. That happens with me from time to time. Just ask Jan. So maybe I am missing something, but I don't get what I read last week about Luke 11 and about Q&A 116 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Both the Gospel and the Catechism say pretty much the same thing. The Gospel says, "The Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (cp. Luke 11:9), while the Catechism says, "God gives his grace and Holy Spirit to those who pray continually and groan inwardly, asking God for these gifts and thanking God for them" (cp. A116). We can sum it up in a simple statement: *God the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask.*

Now, that strikes me as nothing short of amazing. So I must be missing something when I read Joel Green's very thick commentary on the Gospel of Luke. He treats that promise of the Holy Spirit so matter-of-factly, and I don't get it. And I must be missing something when I read Fred Klooster's two-volume commentary on the Catechism. He doesn't bother to wonder at all about the promise of the Holy Spirit, and I don't get that either.

Maybe I shouldn't be surprised. After all, we do tend to think and to talk about the Holy Spirit in a matter-of-fact way. On our worst days, we see the Holy Spirit as a piece in a doctrinal and theological puzzle, a piece to put into its proper place within the whole arrangement. On our best days, we see the Holy Spirit as a power from God, as a gift from God, to create faith in our hearts, to enable discipleship in our daily lives, and to inspire witness to our friends and neighbors.

Certainly there is important doctrine about the Holy Spirit. And there is biblical testimony about the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit. It would be wrong for us to minimize that testimony or to ignore that doctrine. But I hear something else in today's Gospel and I hear something else in today's Catechism, when they say that *God the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask.*

Every time Tommy and Bobby saw their Uncle Arthur, they would ask if he had any candy for them. And he would reach into the pocket of his ill-fitting suit coat, pull out a pair of candy bars, and give them to the boys as a sign of family affection. That's the sort of picture that comes to my mind when we talk about the Holy Spirit. We ask for something good, and like a kindly, old uncle, God the Father reaches into his pocket and pulls out the Spirit as a little something for us, a token of our membership in the family of God. That's hardly an adequate picture.

Here once again is the biblical statement. "The Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (cp. Luke 11:9). So there is asking involved. But it's not asking God, like an old uncle, for a little something, for a little help, a little boost, a little assurance, that we then label the Holy Spirit. Joel Green points out that, in the Gospel statement, the verb "ask" has no direct object. So the Spirit is given, not to those who *ask for the Spirit*, but to those who just *ask*. In other words, the Spirit is given to those who turn to the Father in prayer. So the point is not what we specifically ask for. No, the point is the asking, the praying, and how God responds to it.

Frederick Beuchner describes prayer as beating a path from our own door to God's door. He says the point of praying is not what we ask for (or what we offer, if we want to take into account that prayer is more than asking). Rather the point of praying is the praying itself, is that we beat that path to God's door. And Beuchner encourages us to keep beating that path, because one day, down that path, we'll find God coming to our door. That, Beuchner says, is really what we've been praying for all along.

The Gospel says, with the Catechism adding its echo, that *God the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask*. That strikes me as nothing short of amazing.

You remember Moses. Was there ever anyone like him? Who ever heard God more directly? Who ever spoke to God more openly? Who ever saw God more closely? Who ever knew God more intimately? Yes, God had refused to give his name to Moses, not all at once. But Moses had been learning God's name little by little, learning God's name through the powerful actions that set Israel free from bondage, learning God's name through the guiding presence of cloud and fire. And the relationship went both ways. God said to Moses, "I know you by name" (Exodus 33:17).

But amazingly, this wasn't enough for Moses. "Show me your glory," Moses said to God (Exodus 33:18). In other words, *Give me the closest, deepest, most unmediated connection with you possible*. Moses wanted more. Moses already knew God more intimately, more deeply than anyone in any generation. But that wasn't enough for Moses. He wanted more, more even than God could give. "I will make my goodness pass before you," the LORD said. "And I will proclaim my name before you" (v. 19). In other words, *You will know me more deeply and profoundly than ever*. But there were limits. "But you can't see my face, because no one can see me and live" (v. 20).

Was there ever anyone like Moses? No. No one like Moses. No one more intimate with God. But the Scripture says, with the Catechism adding its echo, that *God the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask*. That strikes me as nothing short of amazing.

Let me pull some theology on you, some basic Christian doctrine. With the Father and with the Son, the Holy Spirit is God. As much as the Father, as much as the Son, the Holy Spirit is God. As the Father is God and Lord and the Son is God and Lord, so the Spirit is God and Lord.

So what does it mean that *God the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask*? And what does it mean, to quote A53 of the Catechism, that *the Holy Spirit has been given to me personally*? What does this mean, remembering that the Spirit is not merely a force or a power or a presence? What does this mean, remembering that the Spirit is God and Lord, as is the Father, as is the Son? It means, Christian, that God lives in you. Not some divine hint. Not some divine influence. God.

What I don't get is how the statement *God the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask* – how that statement can be treated matter-of-factly, how it can not evoke awe, amazement, and breathless humility. God comes personally to dwell with us. God comes down the path we have beaten, comes to our door. God doesn't reach into a large pocket, pull out some token, and say, "Here, you can have this." No, God comes and takes up residence with us and in us! That strikes me as nothing short of amazing.

One of our favorite TV programs is Top Gear, the original BBC version. It's fun to watch how Jeremy, Hammond, or even "Captain Slow" James May – how they react when they're at the wheel of a supercar, how they react to the smooth flow of hundreds and hundreds of horsepower, pushing them to 160, 180, 200 miles per hour. The exhilaration and the look of sheer joy on their faces is contagious. But it's excitement over a machine, an impressive machine to be sure, but a machine nonetheless, excitement over what a machine can do and over what we can do with its power.

While it's true, as I've said, that the Holy Spirit is power from God, the Holy Spirit is no machine. The Holy Spirit is no engine for us to link our drive train to and race off. No. The Holy Spirit is God in person. God with us.

Sometimes we talk romantically about how wonderful it would have been to walk alongside Jesus, to see him and hear him every day, maybe even to talk with him, with Jesus, who is God in person. But the Holy Spirit is God in person, God with us in person. Once again, that strikes me as nothing short of amazing.

The trouble is, we don't often experience God with us in person. It's more a matter of theology and doctrine, than of our lived-out reality. On a good day, we can convince our minds that the Holy Spirit is God with us. On a spiritual day, our hearts may be convinced, too. But on the run-of-the-mill days that fill our lives, the days not especially good and not especially spiritual, the days when we're wrapped up in the ordinary cares of life – on

those days, we would certainly doubt that God was with us in person, if we gave it a thought at all.

When you're sitting next to a campfire, you know it. There's the light and the heat. And there's the smoke that gets in your hair and in your clothing and sometimes in your eyes. The Holy Spirit is the fire of God. Certainly we would know when the Spirit is with us. From the light. From the heat. Even from the aroma that clings to us. There's no way we could miss that. Is there?

Perhaps it comes down to this. *God the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask.* To those who ask. In other words, to those who pray, to those who live aware of God and in touch with God.

I should say here that I don't think prayer is just a matter of words, of saying things and asking for things. Prayer is being aware of God and being in touch with God. In your mind. In your spirit. In your heart. In your hopes. In your dreams.

So pray. Beat that path to God's door. And don't be at all surprised if, down the path you beat, God in person, in the person of the Holy Spirit, comes to your own door. Which, of course, is nothing short of amazing. And which, of course, is what we're praying for most of all.