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Luke 11:1-13

Ask, Seek, Knock

Ask. Seek. Knock.

If we do these things, God promises--not a fish, not an egg, such as children might ask for, but the Holy Spirit.

What are we to ask for? This isn't about asking for a new car, or for the Oakland A's to win the World Series, much as we might like those things. It's about asking what we can do to bring the reign or kingdom of God here on earth. In the reading today, Jesus just taught the disciples to pray for it: thy kingdom come. We say it in worship every week: thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We are praying to bring God's reign or God's kingdom here on earth.

Ask, seek, knock--these are active verbs. We're not supposed to sit around and wait for the reign of God to appear by magic--angels swooping in and cleaning up the planet, or Jesus riding in on some cloud. The reign of God is not like some tray of hors d'oeuvres that floats past us at a party and we just help ourselves as it comes by. The reign of God does not happen for us, without any effort on our part. If the reign of God is here on earth, it is up to us to make it happen. It will not happen without effort, without a lot of people who care deeply.

The planet is dying. Too many people, too much carbon in the air, too much carbon in the oceans turning them acid, too many oil spills, too many mountaintops removed for coal, too many rivers destroyed by silt and arsenic and mercury from coal slag, too much garbage dumped and forgotten, too many dead zones in our waterways because of fertilizers and pesticides, too many species pushed to the brink of extinction and beyond. This is not God's reign.

In his latest book, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, environmentalist Bill McKibben says that global warming isn't something that will show up for our grandchildren. It's here and now. "Forget the grandkids," he writes, "It turns out this was a problem for our *parents*."¹

This is not the reign of God. This is what happens when humans think that dominion over creation means domination, rape, and exploitation of the planet. We were never invited to do that. We were to till the garden and keep it. We were to take care of it.

And we still can.

Ask. Seek. Knock.

We must seek hope. Hope that is based in reality, not in denial. Hope that is tangible, measurable, do-able. Bill McKibben writes, "Maturity is not the opposite of hope; it's what makes hope possible."² We have to look at the problems head on and see what the challenges are. Sally Bingham did this, and she is changing the world. She was a stay-at-home mom and an Episcopalian. She didn't have a college degree. Years ago, as information about all our environmental challenges became better known, she saw all the biblical texts about reverence for creation and wondered why she never heard sermons on

what we were doing to our planet. People were coming to church and not making the connection between creation and dumping litter out their car windows or driving SUVs. So she finally became that person who would preach about this from the pulpit. She went to college at the age of 45 and then to seminary. The Rev. Canon Sally Bingham of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco founded Interfaith Power and Light about 10 years ago. It now has 35 state affiliates and 10,000 congregations--Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and others--all working together to reduce carbon emissions, educate, advocate. Over the past 10 years, California Interfaith Power & Light member congregations have prevented not hundreds or thousands but millions of pounds of CO2 from being generated and put into the atmosphere. They've done this by taking action in their own congregations and in their members' homes: planting community gardens, installing solar panels, arranging for carpools to church, installing CFL light bulbs, and on and on. It may not seem like much when you look at just one congregation, but when you get all those congregations--and all those individuals within those congregations--taking steps that are tangible, measurable, and do-able, all their actions together may not solve the problem of global warming but they are a step in the right direction.

My greatest hope in meeting the daunting challenges of global warming comes from communities of faith. Because we understand one thing: we do not work alone. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray not because they had never prayed before--they were Jews; they'd been praying their whole lives--but because they saw in Jesus' prayer life some connection with God that was deep. Jesus said not "God" or "Lord" but "Father"; his relationship with God was as close and as deep as that of a child to a parent. In Luke, he doesn't even say "Father in heaven," which implies distance; just "Father," as if God is right here. Marcus Borg talks about God being closer than our breath. Augustine says to God, "Since nothing that is could exist without You, You must in some way be in all that is; [therefore also in me, since I am]." ³ In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says, "The kingdom is inside you and it is outside you." ⁴ This is an incarnational view of God: God is not just up there somewhere, far away from it all, but God is in creation and deeply involved.

God, Spirit--however you want to call it--is with us always. As we communities of faith work to bring about the reign of God, God works with us. Creating the reign of God on earth is too big a job for us ever to complete. We can't check it off our to-do list and move on. But if we become discouraged, we can remind ourselves of what a Jewish text called Pirkei Avot says: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it." ⁵ We don't have to do the whole thing, solve the entire problem, but we do need to do the part that we can.

Ask. Seek. Knock.

At whose door can we knock to bring about the reign of God? Communities of faith actually have an advantage when it comes to politics. Our legislators aren't that used to seeing us in their offices, so we represent something different. And because faith knows no one political party, we can talk to Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Green Party folks--anyone. California Interfaith Power and Light just made a trip up to Sacramento last month and knocked on the doors of a whole lot of legislators--close to 50. We handed out information packets, had short, delightful conversations, and then left. I was allowed to tag along--this is part of my summer internship. One legislative staffer

suggested that we build up relationships with our legislators so that they know who we are. Invite them to special events--celebrating the installation of solar panels, for example, or planting a new community garden--so that when we come knocking on their doors in Sacramento, they already know who we are.

She said it: it's all about relationships. Where have we heard that before? Jesus said the most important rules to remember are to love God and our neighbors. That's all about relationships, too.

In the old days--in Jesus' time--if you wanted to talk to someone, you walked to their house and knocked at the door. These days there are so many other ways to do a virtual knock: we call on the phone, write letters, write e-mails, friend each other on Facebook, send Tweets on Twitter, Skype, post videos on YouTube. We truly are a global village. Everyone is our neighbor. Bill McKibben recognizes this, and through his organization 350.org he's trying to organize the entire global neighborhood to have a work party. The idea is to show our leaders that we are ready to take action to fight global warming, even if they are not. If the people lead, the leaders will follow--that's the hope. He picked a memorable date, which unfortunately we have already booked: 10/10/10. For Mira Vista, that's our 60th anniversary celebration, and we have a busy day planned. That doesn't mean we are out of the loop entirely; we can just pick a different date. Or we can do something that's ongoing. For starters, we could join California Interfaith Power and Light. There's also an interfaith Bay Area group that is just getting started. The point is to do something, to take what action we can.

Ask: What can we do to bring about the reign of God?

Seek: Hope that is based in reality.

Knock: On whatever doors it takes to make it happen.

I invite you today to take some time to think about what the reign of God looks like to you. Write some ideas down on paper. And then think about how God calls you to work toward that reign of God. Because there is hope, as long as we work to make that reign of God a reality. Amen.

Notes

1. Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 16.

2. McKibben, xiv.

3. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.2, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 3-

4. Quoted in Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 72.

4. Gospel of Thomas, 3.

5. Pirkei Avot 2:21.