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What Are You Looking For? Luke 11:1-13

In college, during breaks, I worked at a store inside a mall. This was long enough ago that they didn't take any credit, just cash, and had a big sign on the cash register that said so.

One day a fellow came in, made his choice, brought it to me at the cash register (with the "Cash Only" sign) and asked, "How much off for cash?" "Sir," I replied, "we only take cash. No credit."

"But how much off for cash?"

"Sir," I said, pointing to the sign, "we only take cash."

He leaned over the counter, conspiratorially – "Right. So, how much off for cash?"

He was asking, but the only answer he could get was not what he wanted.

Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you, because that's how God is. So says Jesus, teaching about prayer, communication with God.

Right now, this part of the body of Christ is going through a grieving process.

Grief is about loss. It can be any sort of loss: a death, or a dream; something precious broken, something loved gone. Even a change: things aren't the way they were, and we've lost something.

It's commonly accepted that we move through grief in five stages: the first, denial, is simple – refusing to believe that whatever happened, happened.

The second is anger. That anger is often irrational, sometimes directed at God, sometimes at others who played no role in the event, sometimes at ourselves.

The third is bargaining, trying to figure out a way to get back to where you were, sometimes even trying to make a deal with God.

Fourth is depression. Deep sadness over the loss, sadness that doesn't just blow away after a little while, sadness that makes the world a darker place.

Finally, acceptance. And acceptance is a tough thing to explain: it isn't that you're suddenly okay with whatever happened, it's that you've managed to integrate it into yourself so that it no longer overwhelms you. All this takes time.

One of the blessings of church is that it is people. One of the most difficult parts about church is that it is people. And people like to talk – which is good, but can be bad, because too often the talk is just talk. What is needed is communication.

The great myth of communication is that it's actually happened – that information has been accurately shared. I have never known – and don't expect to find – a church that doesn't have a communication problem. For a couple of years while Valerie was still in the Army, I served as part-time pastor of a church of twenty-five members, all but two of which were from three families.

They often talked about their church's communication problem.

So it was no surprise that I heard a lot about Valley's communication problem when I got here, and it's no surprise that it turned up in the Commission on Ministry's report to Session last month. (The summaries are still available at the Welcome Centers, and it will be in the next Valley Voice.)

I do not want to minimize this for one second. Communication, real communication, is essential to health and to healing in any group, especially the church. Part of what makes Christianity special is that we believe that God speaks to us. Jesus says, ask! And you will receive. Communicate with God.

Human communication can be difficult at best, when people can share openly. It only gets harder when there are limits to what can be shared. Last week, the Administrative Commission of the Presbytery's Commission on Ministry met with Session so we could get to know each other. We shared is how hard it is to talk openly when explanations are wrapped up in confidentiality and legal issues; when someone asks a question you are bound not to answer.

That is frustrating, stressful, and painful – and what only makes it worse is that you can offer no response to others' stories, you can't offer soothing truths, and you can be sure that if there's an answer vacuum, it will get filled, without any need for connection to reality. The members of the Administrative Commission shared their own, similar experiences – but that did not take away all the frustration – because however much we want to communicate, we can only go so far, and that is hard for everyone. There is more than enough frustration to go around. It's not going away soon.

So how do we move beyond that? The answer is trust. Trust, though, is in short supply these days, anywhere. Jesus even takes care to remind the disciples that God is trustworthy, and my goodness, you would think he wouldn't have to do that! But I must ask that you trust the AC, the Session, and the process.

There are many things we can ask for – but right now what we need to ask is for hope, healing, and understanding.

Big Bird, the Sesame Street character, often says, "Asking questions is a good way of finding things out!" The difficulty too often is that people are prone to ask people they expect will give them the answer they want rather than ask someone who actually knows, or when there is no information available, fill in the space with assumptions or rumors.

I listened to Donald Trump's acceptance speech last Thursday night. Then I spent some time listening to fourteen commentators talk at each other about the speech. As far as I could tell, no two of them heard the same speech. Of course, I had a different take, too. What's said, what's heard.

Jesus' next statement: seek, and you will find.

What is it that you're looking for? You've probably known children – and adults – who keep asking different people until they get the answer they want. We should know that the answer we *want* may not be there. So we have to live with the question. The answer you want may not be there.

In this context, that means use the system. Use your Session. And as an aside, something else you should know: the door to my office is open. Whether you want to ask a question, unburden a load, tell me off,

it's open. I am always surprised that this is a surprise to so many people: far too often I hear, "oh, I didn't want to bother you."

So let's talk. There are many issues and questions and comments that rise up from any group of people of more than one. You know, it is so much easier to spend five, ten, twenty minutes listening and talking and learning in both directions than it is to take months straightening out a mess of misunderstanding. The lack of this kind of communication is part of what the Presbytery found here, and it isn't hard to find in many other places. That goes for all of us, in all our interactions.

Ask. Seek. Knock and come in! Let's communicate!

The third portion of Jesus' lesson is a promise posed as a question. And it is about trust.

We live in a nation governed by elected representatives. A representative democracy. It's a great idea – and while it can be trying at times, it's the best solution humanity has managed to come up with for governing a nation.

It's also how we govern a Presbyterian church. You elected the elders to represent you, to do a lot of the sticky bits of getting on with being a church, on your behalf. That is what they do, and they do it not as volunteers sitting on a board of directors, but as called and ordained women and men who have taken solemn vows before you and before God to exercise their responsibilities in accord with their consciences. It

is, particularly in times like this, a job with heavy burdens, high stress, responsibility, and lots of work. None of them takes their work lightly.

And that's why they, too, are part of the "knock" – they are there for you to ask questions of, to bring comments to, even when they are unable to give you details because they are bound by law or confidentiality. That's where trust comes into play.

Jesus asks, who'd give their child a snake when they asked for a fish, or a scorpion instead of an egg? Jesus is describing God's care for us as God's children, but it is also what your Session tries to model. But because we're all human, it isn't obvious or easy. We strive to do what is right, sometimes when finding the path is hard, or when all the choices are painful.

Does that mean that somehow they're different from everyone else? No. Does it mean they're trying to patronize you? No. Does it mean that they're trying to keep secrets? Only if you want to call what they are bound by civil and church law to keep confidential "secrets."

Which comes back to communication. As your church leaders, we've been and are now even more committed to letting you know what's going on. We can and always will try to do better, but we need your help. If you don't understand, if you have questions, if you disagree, speak up. Don't spread rumors, do seek answers.

The prophet Isaiah was told during a vision of God in the Temple that people will be difficult to reach, “lest they listen, turn, and be healed.” Listening, listening carefully and without judging, is a good way to learn things, too. And both talking and listening, when they come from the right motives, are important in healing the wounds of strife and rumor and misunderstanding, and give glory to God. We ought to be seeking God’s help in healing.

After worship last week, someone who loves this church – that means you – not even a member, asked me a truly beautiful question. “How can I be part of the solution?”

Ask, seek, knock. Listen. Trust. Pray. Allow God to work healing in and through you.