Good Things

Matthew 7:7-11

Buckingham Church

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 “Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks will find, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)

 Okay, right off the bat, let me make clear what this does NOT say about God. God is not Santa Claus. God is not a Cosmic Vending Machine. God is not Amazon Prime. And Jesus is not inviting us to be whining children with, as a great Berenstain Bears book once put it, “the galloping, greedy gimmies.” Jesus is not inviting us to be like Dudley Dursley in the Harry Potter books, howling that he got one fewer birthday present than he did last year. Jesus is not telling us that God will always give us what we think we need or want. Too often this passage has been simplified into those things, and prayer reduced to a transaction.

 Our relationship with God is meant to be much deeper than that. And much better. Because the gifts God offers, indeed longs, to give us are not things you can put in a box, in our mouths or on our bodies. The gifts God longs to give us are infinitely more powerful and valuable than that. The gifts God longs to give us can transform our lives, and the world, if we can stop holding back, holding onto what we think is needed or important or valuable.

 The Sermon on the Mount to this point makes following Jesus sound very difficult indeed. Here’s a sampling of what Jesus calls his followers to do in the verses up to the ones Frank read today:

* Don’t just refrain from murder, stop being angry at your neighbor
* Reconcile with everyone with whom you’ve had an argument.
* Don’t look on another person with lust.
* If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other (non-violent resistance to evil)
* Love your enemies
* Don’t do good deeds to get recognition, just do them
* Forgive everyone.
* Don’t focus so much on accumulating stuff
* You can’t serve God and money.
* Don’t judge anyone else but leave it to God.

One might imagine that at the coffee hour following this sermon, people might be going up to Jesus to say, “You’ve got to be kidding. No one could do this. It’s not human nature. It’s too hard, in fact, it’s stupid.” Jesus’ response to that was, “Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.”

The theologian Clarence Jordan put it this way: “[the solution] wasn’t to learn the secret words or the magic formula which would cause God to respond favorably to [our requests], but to open up between [us] and God a mighty channel through which God’s already prepared power could flow.” (*Sermon on the Mount*, p. 109) Jesus says, ask for that channel to flow and bathe yourself in the living water.

The power to live the kind of life Jesus called us to in the Sermon on the Mount is available to us, Jesus says, and all we have to do is ask for it. God already knows our limitations; God also knows that we are more powerful than we have yet begun to live into because we ask so little of ourselves and of God. We play small.

The writer Marianne Williamson famously put it this way: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

When we commonly think and speak about the gifts God gives us, especially at a time like Thanksgiving, we often focus on the tangible things. As the hymn puts it “the seedtime and the harvest, and soft, refreshing rain.” And goodness knows those are gifts, this whole good earth which we so often trample and harm and trash is an enormous gift from God. Our food, our loved ones, our church, our homes, our lives are all gifts, for which we should give thanks, and not just once a year. When we don’t have those things, or don’t have them in the way we think we should or the way we want, then it can be tempting to blame God or to think that God does not hear our prayers or love us. Jesus also said in the Sermon on the Mount that food and clothing were there for us if we trusted God. Maybe not exactly in the way we want them, but there if we receive them. As the Rolling Stones sang, “you can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you might find, you get what you need.”

God, however, believes that what we truly need is something much bigger and more significant than stuff we can touch or consume. The fact that God is willing to empower us beyond what we are willing to ask is amazing. There really is no supply chain problem there. So, as you consider what you are thankful for this week, how about considering these things:

* A time in your life when you got through great difficulty that you didn’t think you could get through.
* A time in your life when you found you were able to love in ways you never thought possible.
* A time in your life when you were forgiven by someone, or a time in your life when you were able to forgive and reconcile a relationship. Or both.
* A time in your life when you did not give in to your worst impulses. Or a time when you did and were rescued and forgiven.
* A time in your life when you acted for good in a sacrificial way.
* A time in your life when you found you had gifts or talents or abilities you never thought possible. And used them.

God was in all these times. Say thank you.

And if you cannot think of anything that fits into any of those categories, then take some time to open yourself to that “mighty channel through which God’s already prepared power could flow” to you. Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. If you do, I think that you will have more occasion for thanks than you can imagine. Amen.