

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Year C
July 29, 2007
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“Ask, Search, and Find”

Luke 11:1-13

Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

Give us the wisdom, courage and strength to become who you call us to be. Amen.

In May of 1976 a three month old little girl was baptized in this church. Her family still has the picture of Larry Gipson holding her in her christening gown.

In May of 1988 when she was in the seventh grade, she was confirmed right here at this altar rail.

And, either the year before that confirmation or after, she cannot really remember time too well she had a powerful, spiritual experience in these very pews. During a sermon one Sunday, the Holy Spirit washed over her and she knew with all her being she was going to be up there preaching one day. That was her first call to ordained ministry.

20 years later the Spirit continues to breathe through her life.. Here I am Lord. Yes, I was that little girl baptized in 1976, confirmed in 1988 and who received the call to priesthood. Little did I know I would preach in this very pulpit. For years I have wondered what it would feel like to be right here doing just this. Here I am Lord.

The experience of the Holy Spirit giving me clarity about preaching that day when I was 12 or 13 has been a bedrock of my ordination process. I cannot tell you the exact date, I'm not even exactly sure how old I was, I cannot tell you who was preaching or what they said, but the message came as clearly as I have experienced any other event in my life. And, I have to say it is a powerful experience today to be standing in this pulpit.

It has been my experience that it is difficult risking answering what God calls us to in our lives. I had no idea what I fighter I was until I started taking God's call seriously. The Holy Spirit really got a hold of me when I was living in Spain for a year after I completed my Master's in Counseling. It proved to be a powerful opportunity to spend a year away from home, away from society as I knew it, it created a lot of space for God to move me and guide me. It opened me up to listen to the Spirit in ways I couldn't hear when I was surrounded by things I knew so well. And, I began to pray. I prayed a LOT when I was in Spain. I was asking God to guide me, show me how He wanted me to live my life. How could I serve Him? “Ask and it will be given to you,” says the reading from today's gospel.

So, I began searching for that call that had already been given me years and years ago. What I kept hearing was that I needed to go to seminary, not get a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Surely, that wasn't it. I already had a Master's in Counseling. I was preparing for Ph.D. work by doing this year in Spain. I liked the idea of controlling my schedule as a therapist. I had it all worked out! But, the Spirit kept whispering to me, and it was getting harder and harder to turn her down. "Search, and you will find," says today's gospel.

Upon returning from Spain, five people in one week told me to speak with Rev. George Doebler at UT Hospital, so thinking there must be something to this, I did. I spoke with George for an hour and a half. At the end of the meeting he said, "You should hang out with us for the year." I said to him, "I thought you said you didn't have any more positions." "I did," he replied. "So I guess thanks but no thanks." He said, "Caroline, if you can have a little faith, I think I can make this happen."

So working on faith, I began the Clinical Pastoral Education training at UT hospital, and within a month George had my entire year paid for. "Knock, and the door will be opened for you," says the Gospel of Luke.

The more the doors opened the more I began to fight. I was no longer interested in asking, searching or knocking. I was freaked out! One day one of the chaplains asked if he could have lunch with me. He sat down and said very clearly, "Caroline, you can give up the fight now. It is obvious you are where you need to be. If you can calm down and give up the fight, you will receive the blessings God has for you." I was freaked out even more!

I was on-call that night, and the next morning I sat in the chapel alone. The Holy Spirit washed over me, and assured me that I was not in this alone. God was with me every step of the way, and He had prepared me for this work. So, I laid down the fight and took up the work God had put before me.

I still thought, however, I had somehow out smarted the Divine because I was still nowhere near a pulpit! That is until the bishop said, "Caroline, you have got to try parish work. I'd like you to do an internship next year while you are in school. I want you working for an Episcopal parish." One learns quickly in the ordination process never to say "No" to the bishop, so off I went, and wouldn't you know it. I fell in love with parish work, especially preaching. Ask, search and doors will be opened.

What amazes me is that I wasn't quite sure through most of this journey that this is what I wanted. Yet, I clearly see now that it was what God wanted for me, and it is only after letting go of the fight that I have been able to truly see it is what my soul has been yearning for all these years since that first call when I was 12.

Being back at Ascension the last several months, I have been reminded of how this all began—this dance with the Divine, so to speak. Growing up in this parish empowered me through multiple experiences, interactions and relationships to have the strength to answer this call. The Psalmist in today's reading says "When I called, you answered me; you increased my strength within me."

Though I could not necessarily see it nor appreciate it at the time, growing up at Ascension increased my strength beyond measure. Christ used this parish to help me grow into the person He called me to be and the growing isn't over!

I have such fond memories of being an acolyte. My best friend Margaret Page and I were both acolytes. We danced in the Tennessee Children's Dance Ensemble together, and for us, acolyting was yet another performance. Our favorite was the Easter Vigil—the pews were packed with people, everyone with candles in hand, we got to light the candles along the windows. It was such a moving service.

I can remember evenings when my parents had their Sunday School class over to our house. They were all much older than my brother, sister and I and we adored interacting with them. I can remember batting my eyes at some older boys just loving the attention!

When we were in the seventh grade, the Rev. John Shuler took all of us 7th graders on a Confirmation Retreat. We had such a blast! We got to ask him whatever questions we wanted, and he loved it. I can remember us laughing and laughing—I think we were ever so punchy because we actually got to ask a priest whatever silly questions we wanted to. I remember Margaret asking Rev. Shuler how God answers all those prayers. Did He have an answering machine and got back to people?

That year everyone being confirmed had a mentor. Mine was Margaret's mom, Marnie Page. Marnie and I already had a special relationship, but I believe her serving as my confirmation mentor strengthened our relationship. In fact, she still acts as my spiritual mentor. I call her my "Spiritual Mom," and we brought it full circle when she became Aidan's godmother in June.

Granted, these isolated incidents may not sound like much,—acolyting with my best friend, flirting with older boys in the parish, wanting to go to Sunday School to see my childhood crush, but they created a foundation for my spiritual and religious life which has impacted every other aspect of my life since. I learned as a child that I had a home parish. I had a home in church. People knew me, taught me, cared about me, and prayed for me. There were a whole host of people that wanted to see me grow into who God was calling me to be. What a gift! This is a gift I want for every child at Ascension today and for generations to come.

Even before Aidan was born, I prayed for him. And, the prayer I say the most often is that he has every opportunity to become the child, toddler, boy, young man and man God calls him to be.

I hope God's desire for all our children spreads like wildfire among us. I hope today you leave thinking about how much you want to see each and every child of this parish have every opportunity to grow into the child God is calling them to be. We are called as Christians to teach our children and each other to pray just like the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. We are given the gift of helping raise our children and youth empowering them to ask, so that it will be given to them; search, so they can find; knock, and the doors will be opened for them.

Some of us have been meeting on Wednesday night's to discuss Philip Yancey's book Prayer: Does it make any difference? As fate would have it, one of the chapters for this week was called "Ask, Seek, Knock" discussing our passage from Luke today. He says at one point, "The real value of persistent prayer is not so much that we get what we want as that we become the person we should be." I put a zillion stars by this sentence. "The real value of persistent prayer is not so much that we get what we want as that we become the person we should be." As a parish we can think about it in these terms "The real value of a parish in persistent prayer is not so much that we get what we want as a parish as that we become the parish we should be, helping each other and our children become who God calls us to be."

As I end this first sermon in this special pulpit, I'd like to close in prayer...

Holy Spirit who calls us to empower each other and our children to pray, teach us to ask, search, and knock. Give us wisdom to know how to teach, give us persistence and dedication to keep up your work, and give us your love so that we may love in your authentic spirit. May every single person especially the children who enters these doors feel your love within them and among them, and may we assist in giving them every opportunity to be who you call them to be. Amen.