

Proper 12C  
St. Luke 11:1-13  
July 24, 2016  
St. George's Bolton  
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## Just Ask

*"I say to you, ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."*

*"Be careful what you pray for, because you just might get it."*

These were words of experience and wisdom spoken to me by the parish sexton of my very first church in Waterbury. For those who have never heard the term, it is a fancy church term for custodian. He relayed to me at my ripe old age of 24 starting out as a parish priest, that he had prayed for many things in his life, and received them. Some, he said, came back to bite him.

You see, we may think we know what is best for us. We may suppose ourselves to know what we want in the moment, and pray for it: *"Dear God, grant me this, and I will be happy."* Sometimes we get what we want, and we are surprised. We are happy. Things do work out. We feel very blessed. I know I do. And at other times we get what we want, and such is not the case. What we had wanted brings us sorrow, pain and disappointment. We ought to be careful then, about what we pray for. ***We just might get it!***

Asking God for something is like saying to God, *'I think I know better what I need than you do God, so please change the rules, please change your plan and give it to me.'* Jesus instructs us on prayer in chapter 6:4-9: *"And when you pray, you must not be*

*like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, **for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.** Pray then like this: Our Father..."* Surely God knows intimately what we need, and also what is best for us. And because God loves us, God often does what we desire, not because God needs to "please" us, but because God loves us and wants the best for us, even when we blindly desire things to happen which may not be best for us in the long run. Out of love, perhaps to protect us from ourselves and our willfulness, God sometimes says simply, **no**. What parent has not done the same for their child?

I remember starting out in my ministry in Hartford, a young priest trying to make his mark in life, trying to build an impressive resume. On the offering envelopes of the church was a picture of the existing church which was rebuilt by the Rector of the 1950's and 1960's. Alongside it was a picture of the proposed parish hall, as if it were already built, echoing the lines of the new church, and forming a "U" shaped complex on the property. It became my goal to fulfill this dream of the parish community. I would get this parish hall addition built someday!

Now I never gave a thought as to why it was needed, or even wise to build. I looked for reasons to build it and rationalized that in my own dreams of grandeur and my prayers. Along came a person, who I thought was my savior, my personal messiah who would be the answer to my prayers and dreams, who it appeared would enable the parish hall addition to be built. He generously (or so I

thought) offered to build the whole thing, and then later, even offered to buy a new pipe organ for the church. I should have known better. He was a like a con man who had done this before in other churches and who has done this since. In looking backward, I believe he genuinely wanted to build the addition for us, perhaps out of a sense of guilt, or perhaps because if he thought if he did something good for us, God would answer his prayers and he would be successful in the business ventures he so wanted to succeed to redeem himself. His motives were in part, greed. So were mine. I was greedy to fulfill what I wanted, and I wanted to win the lottery and build this addition. Still I could not truly justify it, other than the fulfilment of ego: mine and that of the congregation which wanted to build it too.

Long story short: We raised the money, the congregation and me, to hire an architect to draft plans for this dream addition. It would have had a church office, which we did not have. It would have had a chapel, which we did not need because we already had one. And it would have had a generously sized office for me, which we did not really need, because I already had one, humble and small, though it was. *(It was actually the size of a closet and became a bathroom when we finally re-built the parish house.)* Still, did we need to build a new addition to accommodate my ego so I could have a respectable, no, perhaps a larger office than most of the other Deanery clergy, fitting my post as rector of a tiny urban parish, or were the current digs adequate to meet the ministerial needs of the congregation and the clergy? The answer was a big yes to the latter, and in hindsight, I had lost sight of the teachings of Jesus about traveling light through this life so you can focus on the ministry which is what is really important. Jesus did not have a parish secretary, *(neither did I, though I had hoped to get one!)* nor did he have an office. He did not even have a chapel to worship in or to retreat to to meditate in. I had

gotten way off the track which Jesus had laid out for me. Wow! How tempting [*and easy*] it is to do that!

Be careful what you pray for! The prayer for the money to build an addition was not answered in the affirmative, at least not at that point in time. We received a set of building plans which we later found were unbuildable, after spending many hours with an architect to have them drafted. \$28,000.00 was spent by a poor parish church that could have been used for many more important things, such as ministering to the poor who we found daily on our doorstep in the capitol city which in the late eighties was much poorer than it is today. The expensive architectural drawings were quickly sent over to the Diocesan Archives in our shame for having been fooled, where they languish to this day collecting dust!

Many years later we built that addition in the late 1990's. But by that time we had a reason and a legitimate ministerial need to do so. We had a very large and growing ministry feeding the poor from our parish pantry. The need grew by the week. This time when we prayed for more space to store food and minister more effectively and efficiently, so we could hand out more food, and help more people, everything fell in place and the addition went up in less than a year. Our dream at that point was simply to build a small extension off the kitchen to accommodate the growing stockpile of food we were passing out. There no longer was any ego involved on my part or that of the parish. There was a faithful effort to follow where God was leading us. And it happened. It was like a miracle, and we built it without a dime of debt or raiding our small endowment which kept the day to day of operation of the ministry of the church humming along. The addition we built also had a church office and a new office for me. It was large not to fit my ego or get my head in the door, but

large so that we could have nice place to hold meetings and educational events for adults. And recently, I understand, someone has finally donated the money for them to buy a new pipe organ to replace the aging one that they have. And oh, after I left, they did hire a parish secretary. Answers to prayers. God is good. God cares!

I have prayed for many things in my life. Looking back, I guess I now understand better the wisdom of these words, "be careful what you pray for, because you just might get it. God is good, I will testify to that, and he has blessed me by answering many of my prayers in the affirmative. We do know how to give good gifts to our children, and we can only imagine, actually, we don't have to imagine, we **know** how much more God will give good gifts to us, His children. I have witnessed it so many times.

Before you pray, analyze your motives. Why do you want what you want? Who will it benefit? How will it serve God? How will it serve you? What do you suppose God's purpose is in your life? What do you suppose will make you truly happy in this life? Do you believe God loves you? Do you believe in the power of prayer? Take stock of the prayers that have been answered in your life. Many times God will say yes and grant your request. Sometimes for your own good God will say **no**.

And don't make bargains with God. *'Lord, if you let me win the lottery, I will give this or that to the church, or my favorite charity.'* Do that now, and not because you want to win the lottery, but because you can do it and need to do it. Don't postpone what you should be doing because you are waiting to win the lottery!

And when you pray for healing, consider what it would mean if your prayer is answered in the affirmative. Why would such healing be beneficial to you?

I know *God* answers our prayers, and often does what we desire of Him. I also trust *God* is doing better things for us, [as the prayer "***For Those We Love***" says] than we can imagine, desire, or pray for. Amen!