

**June 21, 2015**  
**Rev. Dr. Tom Blair**

**‘Sweet Surrender’**

**Matthew 7:7-11**  
**Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore**

Let us share a moment of silence- for the souls of those murdered in Charleston...

The Rev. Depayne Middleton Doctor  
Cynthia Hurd  
Susie Jackson  
Ethel Lance  
The Rev. Clementa Pinckney  
Tywanza Sanders  
The Rev. Dr. Daniel Simmons Sr.  
The Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton  
Myra Thompson  
... Amen.

**Our New Testament Lesson:**

*“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.*

*Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?*

*If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”*

It is indeed with a heavy heart that I prepared these words for you today...

The fog of the Charleston shootings hasn't lifted; the reality of it all is still very hard to face. Words have not come easily in working toward this sermon.

What I try to do, best I can, as many of you well know by now, is, in some manner to ‘braid’ into a meaningful message three different but complimentary strands of thought; of what the author, Richard Rohr, is sharing with us in our Summer Series Book, “Breathing Underwater”, what scripture brings to bear on this situation, and what our common life together in the world at large bears upon us, week by week.

Well, it seems that today, the last braid is the dominant one, bringing us a scene that needs revisiting, a tragedy that we all face together. It is the sheer pain and unshakeable reality of a mass shooting in a church, a hate-filled white man, killing 9 faithful black church goers that I can't get out of my mind.

There is no rational sense in it and it makes for very busy background noise, a steady drumbeat of discordant messages to be listened to, discerned and processed.

The theme for today is "Sweet Surrender", which in a word, means 'acceptance', a recognition that *we* are not God; that there is another- merciful, loving, benevolent and GREATER power than us.

The key phrase of this third of the Twelve Steps is **Turning Our Will And our Lives Over**, in other words, handing off, letting go, surrendering to...

It happens when opportunity meets trust; when the time is right; not necessarily of our choosing, but a moment we can no longer avoid, dismiss or ignore. It may be like a long-overdue visit to the dentist, when that cavity has gotten painful or a tooth has suddenly cracked. It could be like a necessary surgery that you've put off for far too long; there is no way you can fix it on your own, even if you are a Doctor yourself- it's time to admit it and submit yourself to what needs doing.

In reference to the Charleston shooting, there is a lot we see that ought to have been done in regards to the shooter- by parents and relatives, by teachers and fellow classmates, by local magistrates and the local criminal justice system in Lexington County. And we are left shaking our heads, folding our hands, and asking why? What can be done; what can we do, for our part, to be our offering of repentance, understanding and care that we can be a part of the solution and not the problem?

I would submit to you that this is definitely a form of our beginning to turn our will over to the care of God, *as we understand God*, if we take this seriously enough.

The opportunity has presented itself for us to do something, to surrender to the change that is clearly necessary. And to do this takes trust, **turning our will and our lives** over-letting God take the wheel... (remember those bumper stickers that read: “God is my co-Pilot”?)

Richard Rohr says that religious surrender most often turns into a return to the status quo, (it worked before, it will work again)- but that misses the point entirely. When an opportunity presents itself to give oneself over, then it is time for a true leap of faith to happen. When everything else has been tried and you’re at the end of your rope, when all other hopes are lost, then it’s time to accept that you do not have the answer, and Someone Else, greater, wiser, more loving, even everlasting, is the proper source to turn to.

Trust is the underpinning of what Jesus shared with the disciples, and he did so with some of his most upbeat of admonitions, some of the most often quoted words of the Bible. “Ask—Seek—Knock.”

If you’ll allow me, I’d like to take a minute to investigate this part of Jesus’ message with you, as part of what it means to turn over our will and our lives to the care of God.

The grammatical voice Jesus spoke with was imperative- these are orders, not mild suggestions, with clear urgency about them. In each case, the proper emphasis is on the second verb, not the first. That is, ask and it will be **given**; seek and you shall **find**, knock and it **will be opened**. There are no limits attached, neither to when, where, who or how.

To all who ask, they will receive; everyone who seeks, finds, everyone who knocks, has that door swinging open.

The foundation for Jesus' claim is his certainty that God hears everyone who prays.

The two illustrations he shares are taken from everyday Jewish life. Bread and fish are basic foods, everyday sustenance. Stones and snakes are also everyday objects, nothing really special for back then. Stones and snakes might even look a little like bread and fish, or at least they can appear to be similar. But one can't be substituted for the other; it just won't do.

Jesus' fake food argument was a common Jewish style of making a point.

The stone and snake examples are a "how much more" argument—in duplicate, for a double rhetorical effect. If even earthly parents know not to give their children fake food, **how much more** does God know what we need as nourishment to thrive.

Jesus' words for us to *trust* makes prayer much more than an extraneous option; it makes what we ask for in prayer real, tangible, viable- it brings our most honest wants- those we are really willing to lay out before God- right out to the present.

But Jesus' radical trust in the goodness of our heavenly Father also raises a dilemma for us.

How do we square all that imperative faith with our experience? For surely, especially after this week, we know of those whose lives have been shattered by unforeseen loss, much less those who have simply not gotten what they asked for, or sought, or had that door opened for them that they prayed would open...

Traditionally, we have a couple of ways of softening this passage to make it fit into our experience better. We say: ‘Well, not every prayer we pray is answered, at least not exactly in the way we expect. God gives gifts and they are spiritual gifts, available to all who have open hearts to receive them.’ (Gifts maybe hidden to the eye, but not to the readied soul.)

Or, we say, ‘God does things on God's time, not ours, and our prayers will be answered, just not necessarily when we asked for them to be answered.’

Or we say: ‘Well, it must be our fault: We didn't pray hard enough, or long enough, or with the right words or the right attitudes—or **something**. God answers every prayer if we can only figure out the right way to pray.’

All these ways of softening the text may have some truth and might be helpful, but they also, in some measure, misrepresent Jesus' words. The "everyone" at the beginning is unequivocal and absolutely inclusive: **Everyone who prays receives.**

There is, of course, a context to Jesus' words— another bit of evidence, as some say, that Jesus had a very wry and wise sense of humor. The key to us "getting" this text is to understand that all this asking, seeking, and knocking we do is not all about getting our own way, plopping coins in the divine vending machine... (even when our requests seem so straightforward and reasonable.)

The Jesus who is speaking here was the same one, after all, who as a child spent his early years as a refugee, fleeing with his family into Egypt just after he was born, hustled away and hidden because of the threat of Herod.

This passage comes early in Matthew's telling of the Gospel, but still, it is after Jesus' journey into the wilderness, when he looked evil squarely in the eye and denied it's hold.

Jesus' certainty was that when we ask, seek or knock, it is not all about avoiding suffering, it's not about physical nourishment, and it's not about material success in life.

It seems to me that in our culture, we very often reverse faith and seeking. That when we talk about prayer, our surrendering ourselves to God's will, we want specific answers and results, and soon. When we seek, we expect an end to it, sometime (sooner preferably rather than later), and then we will stop asking, seeking and knocking.

But Jesus is encouraging us to participate in the questions, to live out the asking, seeking, knocking- continually. In faith, with faith, through faith, we ask, seek, knock- and the questions will never end.

In doing so, we honor the conversation between human and divine, which is embodied in our living out our lives in faith.

There is no greater example I could ever imagine of the best and worst of what this means than what happened last Wednesday night. There was a young man who allowed himself to be twisted by racist ideologies, who was kindly welcomed by gracious and caring Christians at Emanuel AME Church. What he later did is reprehensible and those who raised and love him are grieving their own special hell.

Those Black family members of the martyred, at the hearing on Friday spoke deeper truth than the shooter could ever begin to fathom.

They embodied a peace beyond understanding, modeled a love that has no limits, and shared a forgiveness that comes straight from the heart of God; as heart-wrenchingly

difficult as it must have been to do...

The bottom line is that these dear folks, brothers in sisters in Christ, have modeled for us what it means to walk in Christ's name. May we be able to follow with them toward peace, understanding and forgiveness, wherever Jesus leads us, asking, seeking, knocking in conversation with each other and all with whom we are called to share our journey, in Christ's name. Amen.