## The Fine Art of Asking

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8 NIV)

In spite of Jesus's encouragement to ask, seek, and knock, many of us sometimes refrain from asking God or our fellow human beings for what we want or need because we believe asking would be fruitless or somehow wrong. Many of us have been raised to believe that it is selfish to want or ask for anything for ourselves. Sometimes we talk ourselves out of making even reasonable requests because we fear being turned down. Sometimes we sabotage ourselves by asking in a way that makes it less likely we will get a positive response. Our unfulfilled longings may cause festering resentment and poison our relationships. How can we help people learn to ask for what they want and need in ways that increase personal fulfillment and strengthen relationships?

Most people feel good when they do something that pleases others. Even seemingly selfish husbands, wives, parents, children, siblings, partners, work associates, or neighbors may respond positively to the realization that they have done something good for someone else. When we make a request in a way that does not create reactivity or uncomfortable feelings, we have a good chance of getting a positive response. If we phrase a request as a complaint, however, triggering guilt and resentment, we are less likely to get what we want. If we ask for what we want with a negative expectation, assuming our need will not be met, that may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Who wants to give when a request is steeped in negativity or blame? Instead of complaining, try expressing your desire as a wish.<sup>1</sup>

In a healthy relationship, partners feel free to say, "I would really love to...." John Gray, in a website article titled "How to Ask for Support" provides three tips for effective asking, which I think apply whatever the nature of a request:

- 1) Use good timing; ask when you have the other person's full attention.
- 2) Be brief: Don't list reasons why your request should be fulfilled. Such a list may trigger resistance; just assume the other person will want to help.
- 3) Be direct; describe clearly exactly what you want. Don't just state a problem and expect the other person to know what you want done about it.<sup>2</sup>

Asking, of course, must respect the freedom of the other person to say "no." Marshall Rosenburg, in his Nonviolent Communication teachings, suggests making a simple statement of your need, followed by the phrase, "Would you be willing to..." as a way of differentiating between a request and a demand.<sup>3</sup> If "no" is the answer, stay calm and centered and assume the other person has good reasons. Be curious, but don't ask "why," because that might put him or her on the defensive. Invite the other person to tell you more, to help you understand his or her response, to explore with you other options for meeting your need. If I am clear about the real need behind a request, I can often come up with other ways of meeting it than what I suggested first. Such nonreactive behavior requires being fully in touch with my inner child. One time, for example, I was feeling upset about the condition of a hotel in which we were staying. After some exploration of my feelings, I realized that although the conditions were not overwhelmingly

intolerable, I felt somehow diminished by my surroundings. When I shared that realization with my husband, he grinned and said, "You certainly deserve something better." That affirmation lifted my spirits and freed me to laugh about our lodgings.

Gay and Katie Hendricks, through their Hearts in True Harmony teachings, state that often when we feel that our partner isn't listening and isn't providing the love and understanding we need, what may really be going on is that we are not listening to and loving ourselves. When we love ourselves, we tune into our feelings and listen to ourselves kindly and with compassion, which calms the inner child that is trying to get our attention. Then we can express our feelings to others without blaming or attacking them. When we listen to our own feelings, we find it easier to listen to the feelings of others.<sup>4</sup>

John Crosby, in an article titled "On the Origin of the Taboo Against Self-love," traces our difficulty in loving ourselves to Western culture based on certain prohibitions in the Bible against making false idols. To discourage people from loving themselves <u>more</u> than God or others, early church leaders taught that the self is unclean and in need of redemption. Yet Jesus clearly taught, echoing Leviticus 19:18, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-39, NIV) If we overlook the words "as yourself," we may easily be persuaded to deny our own desires and longings, even when there is no need to do so. When we assume that our heart's desires are inherently wrong, we miss opportunities to experience the kindness and generosity of others, as well as God's gracious and abundant love and care for ALL God's children, including ourselves.

Through preaching and teaching, as well as by modeling healthy interpersonal relationships, we can help persons understand that we all are beloved children of God. I believe that God longs for us to be whole and happy, in spite of life's trials and tribulations. I believe God's call to serve others is best fulfilled when we do so out of hearts overflowing with gratitude and confidence in a God who loves us deeply. I believe Jesus teaches us not only to ask God for what we want and need, but also to make requests of each other in ways that can strengthen relationships and enrich our lives.

Jane P. Ives, United Methodist Marriage and Family Ministries Consultant (5/30/2017)

10 Quaker Lane, Portland, ME 04103, 207-797-8930, Janepives@gmail.com

Copyright United Methodist Discipleship Ministries, www.umcdiscipleship.org - Used by Permission-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, *Making Marriage Simple: 10 Relationship-Saving Truths, by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. and Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D.* (New York: Harmony Books, 2013), p. 88)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D., *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encitas, CA: Puddledancer Press, 2003), p. 85

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>http://www.heartsintrueharmony.com/m/email/nl/you-dont-listen-banish-this-from-your-relationship.html <sup>5</sup>John Cosby, *The Humanist*, Nov./Dec. 1979, pp. 45-47