

The Rev. Martha Sterne
Sermon, All Saints
24 July, 2016

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ.

Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

For lots of us, there is something embarrassing about asking. Perhaps the embarrassment is left over from being a kid and not wanting to draw attention to yourself and your needs because needing anything just seems sort of impolite. So you sit in the first grade afraid to whisper to the teacher that you would like to go to the bathroom. Or you are at your new friend's house and her mother says, What would you like to drink? And you say, Oh, I don't care. And she hands you strawberry nehi, which you despise and smiles and watches for you to take a big old sip.

For some of us, it dangerous to ask because once you put your need or desire out there, the ask-ee then has the power over you to say no. So we hope those around us are mind readers. Spouses, friends, everybody is supposed to read minds. And I get mad when you don't. And you get mad when I don't. And we slog along alone because we won't ask.

So this is a plea for us to ask. Even haggle!

Did you ever think of haggling as a sign of trust? Wouldn't we be so much better off if our politicians quit these blustering, sometimes terrifying soliloquies and instead haggled with each other? ? In this bizarre, murderous season with enraged, weaponized loners running around the world, what would it be like if haggling was honored and taught? Not just to make money but to make community??

Look at Abraham who was God's friend. Abraham haggled, even with God. Because he trusted God enough to be vulnerable, to ask God to change God's mind. Even to ask God to forgive a city gone wild. A city which had forgotten the meaning of hospitality, a city infamous for its viciousness, where predators ruled and the stranger was assaulted. Abraham—because he loved just one person, his nephew Lot, all it takes is one across the wall—asked God to spare a city. So Abraham questions: Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Far be it from

you to do such a thing. What if there were fifty righteous in it? God thinks it through. Well, okay for fifty. Abraham sees the tide turning, but he is not sure he can find fifty faithful people—this is a real bad town. What about forty-five? Suppose we can't find that last five righteous people. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five? Note how he flipped it over. Now that was good haggling. God says, Oh, okay. We can make do with forty-five. And eventually, Abraham beats the Almighty down all the way to ten faithful people. Ten people. And ten, by the way, is the number it takes to make a synagogue. To form church. So for the sake of one little church, God will sanctify a big, bad city. Because Abraham haggled with the Holy One. Think about that.

Probably the best haggling saint in our midst took her leave of us and this earth on Wednesday, Dr. Mary Lynn Morgan. Gorgeous woman. Ice blue eyes even at 95 years old.

Mary Lynn was, among a gazillion other things a foundational teacher and leader at Emory University and a beloved, fierce conversationalist and mentor for me and so many others including I bet her husband the legendary Atlanta Constitution editor, Ralph McGill.

Her vocation was pediatric dentistry – she was a pioneer. Now you stop and think about what is the art and science of pediatric dentistry? How O how do you dentist children? Haggle.

Here's what she told me years ago – I wrote it down but I can hear her voice right now, “The thing about pediatric dentistry is that you are taking children and presenting them with a very frightening experience. So you have to think about the stages of childhood. You don't want to swoop in and do something that is invasive. You have to learn where a child is. For instance, you can give a three or four year old an injection if you cover up her eyes so she can't see the needle. You really can't do that with a seven year old; you have to talk him into it. You really do have to have permission – that's hard to teach dental students. She said, I remember spending one solid hour trying to talk Charlotte Bate's daughter into letting me give her Novocain.

Now that's haggling. That is asking, seeking, knocking. God bless you Mary Lynn.

Asking is all through the prayer that Jesus teaches us. We ask that the reign of God come when all shall be well. We ask that we have what we need for that day, maybe so every day we will remember where all of what we have comes from. And we ask for forgiveness of sin. And we bargain that we will forgive others. And we plead that God will not lead us into testing, into the time of trial because, really, who wants to go there. Even Jesus asked that the cup be passed.

Yet it wasn't. As you remember. The cup of testing, of suffering was not passed. So even Jesus asking did not lead to an automatic yes. When you ask, the answer may be yes or it may be no or it may be wait; but somehow in faithfully asking, the door is opened to grace.

So ask. Yes, even haggle. And maybe you'll get just what you want, just how you want, just when you want. That's what we are all hoping for isn't it? But maybe you ask for something and instead, the gift God gives is the gift of strength to endure what is, the gift of wisdom to cope, the gift of hope to look beyond the crisis or even the chronic. Perhaps instead of getting the situation changed, we are given the gift of a changed self. We are given our very selves with more depth, more power, new life. Not a bad bargain.

Can we – in this rancorous season abroad and season of change here amongst us - trust each other enough to haggle? Do we trust God enough to haggle? Remember what the Man said, *Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened. For you. amen*