

Jon Hauerwas – April 24, 2016 – “Knock, Knock, Knockin’”  
Psalm 121 and Luke 11:1-13

*Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* is an American Western classic from 1973 that often ranks among the top 150 films of all time. The movie features the music of iconic singer/songwriter Bob Dylan who composed several songs for the movie’s score and soundtrack. And it is his song that is heard in the background while Sheriff Baker lies dying following a shootout with gangsters.

In that song, called “Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” Dylan writes, “Mama, take this badge off of me. I can’t use it anymore. It’s getting dark, too dark for me to see. I feel like I’m knockin’ on heaven’s door. Knock, knock, knockin’ on heaven’s door. Knock, knock, knockin’ on heaven’s door. Mama, put my guns in the ground. I can’t shoot them anymore. That long black cloud is comin’ down. I feel like I’m knockin’ on heaven’s door.” And then the refrain again: “Knock, knock, knockin’ on heaven’s door. Knock, knock, knockin’ on heaven’s door.”

The image here is that when our careers and our callings come to an end – that when death finally rears its head – that is typically when we are most persistent in our knocking, and in our searching, and in our desire to be with God. And while this is certainly understandable – I mean, it is hard for me to imagine one not entertaining

notions of God in the throes of their final moments – it also makes me wonder if we really must wait until the bitter end to recognize our profound need for the things of heaven. To say this a little bit differently, what would need to happen in order for us to become seekers in our living, and not merely in our dying?

I once read an article entitled “Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church.” And while the title certainly sounds as dire as they come for those of us who are invested in the church, the more I read, the more I realized that the article is actually a lot more about seeking than it is about leaving.

The piece was written by Rachel Evans who is the same age that I am. And she described her own experiences as an author and speaker on this topic. She tells about being “armed with the latest surveys, along with personal testimonies from friends and readers,” to explain how – and these are her words – “young adults perceive evangelical Christianity to be too political, too exclusive, old-fashioned, unconcerned with social justice and hostile to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/>. Access date April 24, 2016.

As Evans notes, “I point to research that shows young evangelicals often feel they have to choose between their intellectual integrity and their faith, between science and Christianity, between compassion and holiness. I talk about how the evangelical obsession with sex can make Christian living seem like little more than sticking to a list of rules, and how millennials long for faith communities in which they are safe asking tough questions and wrestling with doubt.”<sup>2</sup>

But, “invariably,” she confides, “after I’ve finished my presentation and opened the floor to questions, a pastor raises his hand and says, ‘So what you’re saying is we need hipper worship bands.’...And I proceed to bang my head against the podium.”<sup>3</sup>

“Many of us,” writes Evans, “are finding ourselves increasingly drawn to church traditions precisely because the ancient forms of liturgy seem so unpretentious, so unconcerned with being ‘cool,’ and we find that refreshingly authentic. What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to ask questions that don’t have predetermined answers.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

She continues, “We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation. We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities. We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers. You can’t (simply) hand us a latte and then go about business as usual and expect us to stick around. We’re not leaving the church because we don’t find the cool factor there; we’re leaving the church because we don’t find Jesus there.”<sup>5</sup>

And finally, Evans sums it all up like this. “Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus.” And so, with this in mind, she cites messages “from forty-somethings and grandmothers, Generation Xers and retirees,” about the kinds of things that people in my generation appear to be seeking. In response to the author, people of every age “respond in all caps with ‘ME TOO!’”

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

In other words, Evans isn't trying "to portray the divide as wider than it is," as some battle of the generations. She simply wants to encourage church leaders with any interest in winning millennials and future generations "to sit down and really talk with them about what they're looking for and what they would like to contribute to a faith community" because "their answers might surprise you."<sup>7</sup>

So what do you think? How does this article make you feel? I hope that it boosts your confidence about who we are and about what we're doing. I hope that it will embolden you, and I hope that it will give you the courage to share the good news of this community with your friends. Because, you see, this isn't about our being against something else. It's about the kinds of things that we stand for. The kinds of things that we represent. And it's about our quest to be seekers, knocking at heaven's door in the here and now, long before "that long black cloud (comes) down."

Ask, seek, and knock. That's what Jesus calls us to do this morning. Be persistent. Persevere in prayer. And know that God will be faithful. I look at all that's going on in our church community right now, and I can only imagine what you've been praying for. For starters, that God might use us to touch more lives in

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

this community. I say this because our most recent Script just came out. And you know what? The stats are in and more people are coming to church here.

Or maybe you've been praying for our financial stability. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that, either. Because our financial situation has improved from a year ago, as well. Now, certainly, it's not all about the numbers. I know that as well as anyone. But I also know that a growing, dynamic congregation is always looking to touch more lives, and to share the good news of the gospel, and to be a blessing to the whole of God's creation. Ask, seek, and knock.

Well, this week, I prayed for you. Granted, I may not have prayed for you by name, but I did pray for you nonetheless. I prayed for your health. I prayed for your well-being. And I prayed that God would continue to bless our church with visitors, and creative ideas, and with passion for ministry. I prayed that we might be generous in our community. I prayed that we might sense God's hand at work among us. I prayed that we would persist in prayer. Ask, seek, and knock.

And as I was doing these things, it occurred to me that some might say that our efforts are in vain. That we're knocking on a door that will finally lead us nowhere. Yet, we remain unfazed because we still come to hear, and to see, and to

learn for ourselves. To sense a holy presence. And to commune with the God. So call us foolish. Call us naïve. Call us anything you'd like. Just don't say that we ever stopped knocking. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.