

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 24, 2022 – The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13 – Prayer
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There are many ways to think about prayer. One definition might be a conversation between a person and God. In today's reading from the Old Testament book of Genesis we have an account of a conversation between the great patriarch of the Hebrew people – Abraham – and God.

God begins the conversation with a reference to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Sodom violent threats had been made against strangers and guests of Lot, a nephew of Abraham. Because of their very grave sin, the Lord was preparing to destroy the city. But Abraham bargains with God. He haggles with God – the presence of how many righteous people in the city would change God's mind about this plan of destruction? 50? Not for 50. Good, so what about 45? 40? On and on goes the haggling until God appears to give in to Abraham – “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” The deal has been struck.

In this rather amusing story, it may seem that Abraham got the better of the Lord. But we mustn't miss the crux of Abraham's argument, stated at the beginning of the exchange. “Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” The fundamental theological truth that supports Abraham's argument is this – God is just. This is part of God's nature, God's being, unchangeable. So, God's apparent “relenting” is nothing more than God bringing God's behavior into line with God's own nature.

Now we turn to our reading from the Gospel of Luke to learn what Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer. Prayer is very important in Luke, an essential component of the life of a disciple of Jesus, an activity that is necessary to equip anyone to participate in Christ's mission in the world.

In Luke's Gospel we see Jesus modeling a commitment to prayer. Luke tells us that in the midst of Jesus' busy life of teaching and healing, “he would withdraw to deserted places and pray” (Luke 5:16). Important events in Jesus' life are often associated with prayer. After he was baptized by John, Jesus “was praying, [and] the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:21-22). The night before he chose the twelve apostles, Jesus “went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). Jesus took his disciples James and John with him when he went up on the mountain to pray, and “while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” James and John witnessed what we know as the Transfiguration of Christ (Luke 9:28-36). Near the end of his life, Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:41-42). From the cross Jesus prayed “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). And his final words were this prayer, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” From the very beginning of his ministry until its end Jesus was a man of prayer.

Our gospel lesson this morning tells us that one day after Jesus had finished praying, “one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples’” (Luke 11:1). At the time rabbis and teachers gave their disciples prayers to repeat. These prayers identified people as followers of a particular teacher. Jesus’ followers wanted him to give them such a prayer. So, Jesus taught them what we all know as the Lord’s Prayer. By the way, we generally use the longer version recorded by Matthew (6:9-13) rather than the version we find in Luke. The Lord’s Prayer continues to define us as followers of Jesus, united constantly throughout the world as millions of Christians offer this prayer to God every day.

Let’s look at Jesus’ parable about the three friends. It is late at night and a man’s friend arrives unexpectedly at his house. He has no bread to offer his guest, so he decides to ask another friend to lend him some. This man has settled in for the night and doesn’t want to be bothered to get up. Jesus says, “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs” (Luke 11:8).

We should be careful as we interpret this parable. Jesus is not teaching that if we pester God long enough, God will give us what we ask for just to get us to stop asking! The parable is about how we need to be persistent in our prayer to God. The lesson is that we are meant to pray always and not lose heart, to pray with faith and trust in God’s goodness.

The parable is also about intercessory prayer. The man is asking his friend for bread, not to have for himself but to serve his guest. This is what we are doing whenever we pray on behalf of someone else, at home, or together here as we name before God the people on our prayer list and others. Jesus teaches us to pray for others persistently and in faith.

Jesus makes a sweeping promise about the results of prayer: “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.” What can Jesus mean? Again, we must be careful not to put our thoughts and words into Jesus’ mind and mouth. He is not saying that God will always give us what we ask for. I’m sure each and every one of us has asked for many blessings from God for others and for ourselves and for our world that God has not given. The promise is that God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. God will give God’s self to those who seek God.

We have a choice to make – to seek God or to seek what God can give. God’s astounding promise is that if we seek God, we will find God. If we are only interested in seeking what God can give, we will have a hard time understanding prayer when our prayers don’t seem to be answered. The goal of prayer is not to change God, to persuade God to give in to our requests. The goal of prayer is not to get God to see things from our perspective, which is often so limited and faulty. Prayer is meant to change us. Through prayer we are to become more aligned with God, not the other way around. (Thank God, I might add!)

We always come back to the Two Great Commandments, the thread of God’s living Word found throughout scripture. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said, “There is no other commandment greater than these.” In this morning’s Collect, we prayed for God’s guidance, that “we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal.” We are faced with choices all the time – to seek God or something less than God. May God strengthen us to choose wisely, to choose God. In Jesus’ name. Amen.