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Today's vignette from Genesis depicts Abraham at his most active, doing everything he can to prevent God from destroying the city of Sodom. God must have been thoroughly entertained as Abraham practiced his prayer of bargaining for the collective. Acting like an auctioneer in reverse, Abraham sang God's praises while he kept lowering the price required to save the city.

While many people take the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as proof of God's ire and readiness to punish sexual immorality, there is something much deeper at stake. We have all seen evidence that suggests one bad apple can spoil the bunch. In this story, Abraham asks God if a minority of good people can save the rest. Would God spare the city if there were 50 good people there ... or 40 ... or even just 10?

Jesus offers a complement to the scene with Abraham when he talks about prayer. First, Jesus teaches his disciples how he himself prays. He gives us a number of phrases that work together to sum up Christian life and mission. Beginning with the instruction to call upon the almighty Creator as "Father," the next petition actually commits us to do all in our power to bring God's kingdom to fruition in our time and place. We ask God to provide all we need, the bread of each day and the sustenance of a world in which forgiveness reigns over selfishness and revenge. Finally, like Jesus himself, we ask that we not be put to the final test, but that the cup of suffering pass us by — if that be God's will.

That's the prayer. Jesus then adds some illustrations about what it means in action. He weaves a parable about three people: One is seeking food, one is so poor that she or he has nothing to share, and the third wants to sleep through the entire drama. The poor person in the middle is a bit like Abraham — pleading with someone who has power to help a person in need. Abraham kept bargaining God down; the agitator in this parable won't let the affluent person sleep in peace until the hungry are fed.

Jesus' next teaching on prayer reworks what we hear in Matthew 7:7-11 and 18:19 — ask and you will receive. Jesus seems to promise that whatever Christians ask will be granted. Luke quotes those same promises as a commentary on the prayer Jesus has taught and the parable of the hungry, the seeker and the sleeper. Jesus' teaching encourages the seeker to keep knocking until the sleeper gives in and opens the cupboard for the hungry one.

As a commentary on the invitation to call on God as a father, Jesus referred to their own experience of parenthood. He didn't say, "You give the kids everything they ask for," but in effect, "Who among you would trick a child by giving her something that could kill her when she asked for food?" We can just imagine how some in the audience cringed when he threw out the idea of sneaking a snake into the hand of a child. Not even a mean big brother would let a little kid near a scorpion.

Jesus used those examples to refocus their imaginations from a fixation on what they wanted to a consideration of how a loving parent responds to children in need. Those illustrations were preparation for the clincher: "How much more will

the Father in heaven *give the Holy Spirit* to those who ask?" (italics added).

Jesus tried to teach that prayer is an expression of a relationship between unequals. When as disciples of Jesus we call on God as Father, we stand in the center of an enigma: We are invited into trusting intimacy with the eternal Creator of the universe, whose name is so sacred that we cannot even pronounce it. That realization alone is enough to move us to the awe that proclaims, "Hallowed be your name!" Those two phrases set up the rest of the prayer to express our relationship with God as one of grateful dependence and committed obedience.

By sharing this style of praying, Jesus invites us to participate in his kind of relationship with the Father. When it comes to praying on behalf of others, the teaching about the seeker who knocked the sleeper out of bed teaches that when we pray for the needs of others, we oblige ourselves to do our part to respond, if only by disturbing those who have but do not share. In terms of our own needs, Jesus tells us to ask for whatever we want and that God will give us the Spirit, which is all we need. Most of all, the gist of Jesus' teaching about prayer — and about everything else — is that God wants to give us what will give us life.

## **GENESIS 18:20-32**

It rarely happens that the Lectionary gives us a nearly continuous reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, but today's story of Abraham and God follows directly after last week's story of Abraham's lavish hospitality and God's even more generous promise to Abraham and Sarah. This week's story begins with the fact that God has heard the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah, cities that had become famous for their mistreatment of the foreigners who visited them.

Genesis 19 will tell the story of Abraham's visitors who arrive in Sodom, where Lot, a foreigner in town, treats them to the same hospitality that Abraham had shown them. But then, the townspeople arrive to mistreat them, and nothing Lot does will dissuade them. Before the people get their hands on the strangers, they are struck blind, and the innocent are preserved from their clutches.

While some assume that Sodom's sinfulness was all about sexuality, Ezekiel 16:49-50 describes their wickedness by saying they were "sated with food, complacent in prosperity ... [giving no] help to the poor and needy ... they became arrogant and committed abominations. In Luke 10:11-12, Jesus says Sodom was not as bad as the towns that reject his messengers. The outcry against Sodom that reached God had to do with their mistreatment of people in need. But in spite of all the attention history has given to Sodom's sin, the point of this story lies elsewhere.

In a statement that sounds a lot like what God told Moses about hearing the cries of the enslaved Israelites, our anthropomorphic God tells Abraham that he has heard the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and is headed there to judge the situation for himself. The context of the story and what follows in Genesis 19 supply for the fact that God never specifically told Abraham of a plan to destroy Sodom, only that God was about to investigate.

Abraham understands that God is going to destroy the evil cities and begins to plead on behalf of the innocent. In a scene taken straight from the marketplace, where the buyer haggles with the seller to get the best price, Abraham bargains God down until he gets the promise that if there are only ten just people in the city, God will not destroy it.

Underneath the petitionary prayer and the rather primitive image of God as vengeful, unsure of what was happening in Sodom, and needing to be reminded of how to act like a real God, there is a theological idea being born. Everyone knows that evil spreads like mold. Abraham wants to know if God believes that goodness can do the same. Could a number of good people save the city? Let's say 50, 40, 30, 20 or even 10?

With this story, Genesis introduces a question that runs through the Hebrew Scriptures. In Job, it is framed as the question of why the good suffer. Isaiah 53:5 teaches that the suffering of the just one can heal the sinner, but Ezekiel 14 seems to contradict that. Today's Genesis story grapples with the thorny questions of reward and punishment and the suffering of the innocent.

Ultimately, the most important argument of the passage is not about how many just people are necessary to save the wicked, but about the character of God and, therefore, of godly people. Abraham's back-and-forth with God dramatizes a perennial debate. On one side, are those who believe that no matter the collateral damage, it is godly to obliterate the wicked. On the other, are those who believe that the judge of all the world acts with justice and compassion. People of

both ilks believe they are called to go and do likewise.

## **PSALMS 138:1-2, 2-3, 6-7, 7-8**

We sing almost the whole of this great thanksgiving psalm. The fact that the psalm speaks in the first person offers us the opportunity to make it a deeply personal prayer.

The opening lines call us to recall a particular moment when God answered our prayer. Once we are in touch with the emotion of that moment — perhaps joy or relief or a renewal of our faith — we are prepared to pray this with meaning. The verse goes on to proclaim that we want to express our thanks in the presence of the heavenly host and of any who would see us rejoicing in God's Temple — or parish church.

The second verse recalls and praises God's everlasting kindness, God's faithful love. We give thanks that we can be aware of God's presence — and for the strength that gives us. The third verse reminds us that we call on God from our poverty. It also calls to mind the joy of Psalm 23, as it proclaims that God is present whenever we are in distress.

The last verse offers a clever combination of thanks and petition. We give thanks, at the same time reminding God that we are counting on more to come.

## **COLOSSIANS 2:12-14**

Paul may have taken the ideas in this section of his letter from a hymn about baptism. The entire reading we hear today speaks of the effects of baptism. The first part explains the traditional symbolism of being submerged in the water as a symbolic way of being buried with Christ. That probably reflects the baptismal practice in Paul's time when the baptized were generally adults. When ordinary cradle Catholics or mainline Protestants — people baptized as infants — read this, they may envy their brothers and sisters who receive baptism when they are old enough to understand and choose to participate in the ritual. The experience of the grace of the sacrament is uniquely vivid for people who opt to ritualize their conversion by symbolically dying and rising with Christ.

This reading invites those of us already baptized to revivify our awareness of the meaning of our baptism. It invites us to ask ourselves what it means to us personally to have died with Christ. It also asks what it means to be raised with him. It is well worth our time to consider what that dying and rising has meant and could mean in our lives.

The second part of our selection moves the focus from the baptized to God's action on our behalf. In the first reading, Abraham questioned how God could allow the innocent to perish with the guilty. Now, Paul tells us that God saves us when we are not innocent. Paul says that the writ of accusation against us has been nailed to Christ's cross. That is akin to saying that our bills have been sent to God's bank account, which more than covers them.

Because of the way God has loved us, our transgressions count for naught. The question for us is, if we truly believe that, what concrete difference does it make in our lives? If we believe it of others, what does that tell us about how we assess them? Our responses to those questions will tell us a great deal about the faith we have in the power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.

## **LUKE 11:1-13**

Luke's Gospel narrative moves immediately from Jesus' reply to Martha heard last Sunday to this section about prayer. Because of that, we can assume that the two incidents comment on one another.

Today's Gospel opens with the disciples' desire to learn Jesus' way of praying. They had surely prayed with him by singing hymns and psalms in synagogue and Temple rituals, but they were also aware that he would occasionally retreat off by himself for a time of prayer. They who knew him as their teacher and leader now asked the most intimate question possible. In asking him to teach them to pray, they were asking him to teach them to relate to God in the same way that he did.

The first phrase Jesus taught them evokes the awesome mystery of the God whose self-revelation we treasure in the Judeo-Christian tradition. First, we address God simply as Father, or in Jesus' maternal tongue, Abba. Although God was

traditionally referred to as Israel's father, a direct address to God with such familiarity was not typical of Jewish prayers. As Joseph Fitzmyer points out in the Anchor Bible Commentary on Luke, the traditional prayer of 18 petitions that Jews repeated three times daily began with the elaborate appellation, "Lord God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob! Most High, Creator of heaven and earth! Our Shield and the Shield of our fathers!" This is a far cry from the simple Abba.

Although Jesus invites us to begin our prayer with the most familiar address possible, he does not domesticate God. The next phrase reminds us that God is not just a buddy. "Hallowed be your name" calls forth the emotion referred to as fear of the Lord. With this phrase, we are asking that we never forget God's grandeur — this is the Creator of the universe, the eternal Source of all being, yet this same hallowed One invites us to call out, "Abba!" The combination of calling God "Father" and hallowing God's name might bring to mind the prayer before Communion when we say, I am not worthy, but your word will heal me. By the grace of God, we are invited to address God as Jesus did.

The next phrase, "your kingdom come," summarizes the goal of Christian life. When we pray this with integrity, we are pledging ourselves unreservedly to the cause of Christ. With this petition, we situate ourselves in the presence of God as people intimately loved by the Almighty and fully committed to God's cause.

The second half of the prayer acknowledges our dependence on God and our need of grace. Recognizing God as the Creator, we ask for what we need for today and tomorrow. The unusual phrase "daily bread" (*epiousios*) is unique to this Gospel, a word hinting that although we need daily bread to survive, we also need the bread of the morrow, the life-giving bread blessed and broken in community.

The double-pronged petition asking for and promising forgiveness becomes a formula for righteousness in the most positive sense. We ask God for forgiveness, recognizing that such a request necessarily entails reciprocity: I cannot hope for forgiveness if I withhold it.

The last petition — do not subject us to the final test — finds an echo on the Mount of Olives when Jesus asks to be spared the cup. As he taught his disciples to pray, so in his moment of testing, Jesus asked for it to pass, but he summed up his life's work by saying, "Not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). This whole prayer summarizes Jesus' relationship with God. By giving it to us, he invites us into that very same relationship.

## Planning: 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Every time I read or hear today's first reading, I chuckle or smile. This passage strikes me as one of the most humorous passages in the Bible. To understand it, we need to recognize that Abraham is dealing with God like a buyer in a Middle Eastern market, haggling over the price for what he wants. He pleads, he cajoles, he grovels and he uses clever shifts in his negotiating pattern to convince God to spare Sodom. God, in turn, plays along, humoring Abraham until God begins to get impatient with Abraham's insistence.

I like the passage not only for its humor but because it exemplifies the kind of boldness in approaching God that the Letter to the Hebrews urges: "So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help" (4:16). Abraham is not afraid to haggle with God; he is comfortable in God's presence.

We can also see this in the prayer that Jesus taught us. When we pray, we are to call God our Father — not a threatening force or an angry master or an unapproachable king.

What might this evidence in Scripture teach us about our behavior in church? I have heard that passage from Genesis many times in church, but I have never heard anyone laugh. I have told a joke in the homily in some parishes, where the best response I got was a slight smile. We seem so afraid to be ourselves, to be really human, in church. Is this really how our loving God wants to act in God's presence and with one another?

In some other cultures, Sunday Mass is a rich celebration with lots of singing and dancing and smiles and even laughter. Perhaps we in the U.S. are still too influenced by a Puritan past to be that free. Whatever the reason, planners and presiders and other parish leaders might spend some time exploring the mood and style of worship in the parish. Is it a deeply human experience or does it require people to leave their emotions and normal behaviors at the door? Could this be part of the reason that young people are deserting our churches?

If you discern that things need to change, how might you start? Would encouraging people to chat quietly in church before Mass begins be a first step? Could preachers find a way to encourage a bit of laughter in a homily? Would livelier music help? Could people be encouraged to clap and/or sway with such music? Can children be enlisted to break down some barriers, e.g. offering a hug to some of the older members before Mass or at the sign of peace? This might all be common in your parish, but further growth is likely still possible. Where will you begin?

## Prayers: 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

### Introduction

Prayer has been a key component of faith for thousands of years. While prayer can be uniquely personal, today's readings provide some essential and expansive insights about it from both Judaism and early Christianity. Abraham and Jesus both extol the importance of persistence, and Jesus teaches us that prayer at its best is communal. We pray as one body of God's people. Most profoundly, we dare to pray at all because God is loving and just.

### Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, your prayer flowed from your deep, personal relationship with the Father: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught the disciples to pray as you prayed: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you invite us, as one people, to this same kind of prayer: Lord, have mercy.

### Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** We are a praying people, and we pray now for the needs of the whole world.

**Minister** For the church in need of prayer and renewal; for those who have been hurt by the church; and those — ordained or lay — who will lead us forward, we pray:

- For those who do not know how to pray or have no community to pray with; for the imprisoned or endangered, sick or lonely, discouraged or depressed, we pray:
- For those who have lost faith in the power of prayer, or for whom prayer has become automatic or formulaic; and for parishes where liturgy or prayer experiences are rushed or impersonal, we pray:
- For those who believe that God must respond to our wishes and requests, or who believe that God prefers particular languages or postures; for openness to new approaches to prayer, we pray:
- For those called to lead and enrich the prayer of the community; for pastors and liturgists, liturgical ministers and musicians, teachers and writers; and for parents teaching their children to pray, we pray:
- For all in this community who need someone to pray for them; and for the awareness that we might be the answer to prayer for someone in need, we pray:

**Presider** Loving God, we dare to come to you as we have been taught, connected to one another and to you through prayer. The boldness of our ancestors precedes us, and we trust in whatever outcomes you grant us. We do this in the name of Jesus, who encourages us to pray. Amen.

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