

July 29, 2007

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

“When it comes to good gifts, Father knows best”

Genesis 18:17-33

*17The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." 20Then the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, 21 I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know."*

*22 So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. 23Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death 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?" 26And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."*

*27Abraham answered and said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. 28Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." 29Again he spoke to him and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." 30Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." 31He said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." 32Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." 33And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.*

Luke 11:1-13

*1Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." 2And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. 3 Give us each day our daily bread, 4and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation."*

*5And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, 6for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? 8I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. 9And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 11What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; 12or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

Sermon

Even though one of the explicit petitions in our Gospel lesson giving of the Lord's Prayer is "lead us not into temptation," when we put our Old Testament and Gospel readings together, it kind of does lead us into temptation. We listen to Abraham, seemingly bargaining with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah—and God allows it! We hear Jesus telling the disciples "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" and think, well that's pretty simple, isn't it? If that's how things work, why shouldn't a prayer work like this? "Lord, you provide all things that are the stuff of life, please answer my plea today." (Booming voice from balcony) "**SIXTEEN**" "Behold I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose I need a second blessing. Will you please give it to your servant?" (Booming voice from balcony) "**THIRTY-ONE**" And so on and so forth until, "Lord, far be it from you that you allow a heathen to win this thirty-five million dollar jackpot! Please give your servant the Power Ball number!"

That's how we want it to be, right? We want to be the one picking the good gifts God will provide to us like our prayers are a stroll down the aisle at Sam's Club. We really, really want that to be the way God works. Some secular and even Christian movements promote this kind of thinking—that if your faith is strong enough God will give you whatever you pray for. Or this new book "The Secret," that claims if your mind is tuned toward positive thinking, the universe will form in a way that brings you what you want. You can "Name it and claim it." Some of you may remember the Prayer of Jabez craze that was around a few years ago when author Bruce Wilkinson wrote a book about it claiming it would "teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers," and that "contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God." The prayer was fine. The idea that it would somehow coerce God into doing what you want was ludicrous.

But we look at Abraham, and we kind of think that is exactly what he's doing. He's trying to spin God into doing what he wants. Abraham wants Sodom and Gomorrah spared. He methodically whittles down the number of righteous people needed for God to spare the cities from fifty to ten. God, on the other hand, being omnipotent, knows exactly how many righteous people reside in the cities—zero, at least in one understanding of the word, four if you count Lot and his wife and his daughter as having a faith in Yahweh credited to them as righteousness. Does Abraham pull one over on Yahweh? Certainly not! Yahweh knows all along the cities will be destroyed. He's just playing with Abraham, letting him think he's getting away with something.

But wait a minute! Is that really what's going on here? What is it that Abraham is asking of God here? Isn't his request to spare the faithful, to show mercy on His people? And finding that Yahweh will be merciful for 50, Abraham asks Yahweh to be even more merciful for 45. And so on and so forth it goes. Abraham, finding God's mercy, is bold to ask for yet more mercy. And much more than playing with Abraham, isn't Yahweh revealing His nature, the same nature He reveals throughout Holy Scripture? God sees a wicked world deserving destruction, yet he shows mercy on the eight people in Noah's family. How many times did the Israelites turn and grumble against God in the wilderness after He saved them from slavery in Egypt, yet He showed mercy and came to their aid. How many times did they turn to other gods in the holy land, yet God showed mercy to those who turned back in faith? What we see here is a God who is just, but is abundant in love and desiring to be merciful to His people.

And in the end, does God not answer Abraham's prayer? Lot's family was most likely "the righteous" that Abraham was most concerned about. The angels give them the word of warning and allow them to flee the coming disaster. Abraham aimed at sparing the evil cities for the sake of the righteous. Perhaps he did so out of concern for Lot's wealth, or maybe out of concern for Lot's friends or the men Lot's daughter's were supposed to marry. But God does the good God aims at. If you read the rest of the story, the angels warn Lot of the coming destruction. He tries to warn his future sons-in-law, but they don't listen. The family flees. Lot's wife, though told by the angels not to look back, does so anyway and turns to a pillar of salt. Fire and sulfur rain down on Sodom and Gomorrah and destroy them. But God has shown mercy. Three "faithful" have been spared. God does the good that God wills to do for His people.

We have a good and merciful God who wants to be gracious and merciful and do good things for His people. Jesus makes this truth explicit in our Gospel lesson. The thrust of the lesson is about prayer. Jesus contrasts our prayers to the shameless midnight request of a neighbor for bread. We're told to pray with persistence, for if the unwilling neighbor will cave in and provide bread for an impudent man, how much more will our loving God who wants to provide us good gifts answer when we come to Him in with humility, reverence and awe?

Unfortunately, all too often when we hear, "*ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks find, and to the one who knocks it will be opened,*" we like to think it means "be the impudent, shameless man" and "bug God until you get what you want." We go there because we are greedy and self-centered and we like the idea of being able to decide for ourselves what is good and what is not. But this isn't a parable. God isn't the neighbor who is sleeping and upset and hesitant to provide. God's stance is flushed out in the second half of the reading where a child asks of a father.

*"What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

This isn't a parable. It's a comparison. We give good things to our children, and we're flawed, fallen and downright evil. How much better is God our Father who is perfect in love and mercy going to give to us, His children? How much has He already given? That, I think, is the key. For this passage ends by naming the good gift God gives—the Holy Spirit. And where does that Spirit point us? It points us always to the gift of Jesus Christ. It points to God becoming man so that He could do for humanity what an evil humanity couldn't do for itself. It points us to the gift of forgiveness won for us by pain, suffering and dying done in our place by the only pure and innocent man ever to live. It points to the resurrection of that man so that the humanity joined with Him can rise also to life forever. The Holy Spirit is the gift of faith which receives and holds onto this gift until life everlasting. This is the gift above all gifts that God always stands ready to give.

Outside of the Holy Spirit we have only this flawed, temporary life. Outside the Christ we can only be concerned with things that are part of a decaying and dying earth. Away from God our Father, we're like a child asking for the serpent or scorpion, concerned only with that which brings us harm.

Does this mean it's wrong to ask for things to do with this life? Of course not! This life is a gift of God and Jesus explicitly tells us to pray for our daily bread, but we do so knowing that through the Holy Spirit we have the bread of life. God has already guaranteed an eternal life without hunger or want. We pray for healing of our aging and failing bodies, but we do so in the sure knowledge that through faith we shall inherit a perfect and unblemished body that stands before God in eternity. We pray for an end to all hardship, war and strife knowing that indeed we can look forward to a time when such things will come to an end. We pray for forgiveness of our failings, knowing that some day we will stand flawless before God's presence. We before God forgive others because of what He has done to forgive us.

And we pray that we keep God's name hallowed in our lives through the outpouring of His Holy Spirit into us. We pray that His kingdom comes upon this fallen world and our fallen hearts in power, strengthening us in the same Holy Spirit.

We pray for lots of things, but we pray knowing that we aren't the one who knows what's best. We pray knowing that God, our perfect heavenly Father, knows what is for our eternal good. We pray in Spirit-given faith, trusting that God our Father provides what we need for the life He wants us to live here on earth. And no matter what our circumstance here on earth, we're able to pray with an eye beyond the empty cross, looking toward the place where every need is filled, every ailment healed, and every joy made complete. Through the Holy Spirit we are "the faithful." We know Christ has cleared away all that stood between us and the Father. We have a future where our loving and merciful Father rains His good gifts upon us forever and ever.