

Genesis 18:20-32

Then the Lord said, 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.'

So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 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?' And the Lord said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Abraham answered, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose 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.' Again he spoke to him, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' He said, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.'

Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." 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.

'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to 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. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give 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!'

Sermon: Natural Prayer

Prayer is not always easy. While words of prayer may pour forth from our hearts, we sometimes feel we are sending them out into a great silence. Like the tree that falls in the middle of the forest, if no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Or, as Sue Hackney asked me yesterday, if a man speaks and his wife is not there to hear him, is he still wrong?

I find comfort in our Gospel lesson this morning when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. Sometimes we assume that prayer comes naturally to people who believe, and we even might judge that our difficulty in praying could mean a deficiency of faith, especially compared to some standard we think we see in others.

But the Gospel this morning teaches that even those whom Jesus has chosen as his disciples, those who have heard him teach and seen him heal, those who have been closest to him now come with this simple request: Lord, teach us to pray.

Perhaps before they met Jesus they thought they knew how to pray, but his words and example have made them question what they used to think, what they saw in their temple and synagogues. Jesus in fact used the prayers of the self-proclaimed religious as examples of what not to do, most notably in the Sermon on the Mount and in a number of parables.

In Luke Jesus tells this story:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks even more directly, again warning the disciples against following the example of those who claim to be deeply religious in their patterns of prayer:

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. (And)

"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

So it could be that before Jesus could teach them to pray, he had to help them unlearn what their experience with religious institutions and religious people had taught them and

reorient them to a new way that prayer would function in their life of faith and discipleship.

There is a kind of natural prayer we enter into with God that is well illustrated by the story in the Old Testament lesson this morning from Genesis. It is really one of the most easily understood stories in all of scripture because it keys right into something very familiar to all of us – persuasion and negotiation to get what we want.

Abraham feels that the Lord is about to give the order to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and so he says to God:

‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 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?’

And the Lord said, ‘If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.’

Abraham answered, ‘Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?’

How clever Abraham is – and how fortunate to get his answer. And he persists, bargaining almost with God and bringing the necessary number down to ten - Suppose ten are found there.’ And God answered, ‘For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.’

I would consider this to be a kind of natural prayer, and since Abraham is our example, could there be anything wrong with it? It’s simple, it’s straight from the heart, it’s direct. I’m sure we’ve all engaged in this kind of prayer, no doubt for our selves but probably with even great fervor for someone we love – for healing, for safety, for clarity, comfort, continuing support.

These kinds of prayers come in on the prayer cards each Sunday and represent natural prayers that are most welcome in the hearing of the Almighty.

Unlike the prayers of self-aggrandizement, unlike the prayers spoken so others make think well of the speaker, Jesus says nothing negative about such prayers. You might even conclude that such prayers will always be answered when he says: Ask, and it will be given to 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.

But I’m not sure that he is offering that teaching in regard to natural prayer. And my experience indicates that there are times when people ask and it is not given, even the most selfless prayers on behalf of a spouse who has cancer or a child who is battling

addiction or any number of situations where we simply don't get what would clearly be the merciful and gracious outcome that is the object of heartfelt and even tearful prayers.

Please take note that in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks the words about "Ask, and it will be given to you" after he has given them the what we now call "The Lord's Prayer" and which is repeated millions of times daily around the world. But this Lord's Prayer is something different from a natural prayer, different from a negotiation with God for what we want. I would call it a righteous prayer, a prayer that gives up negotiation with God and instead puts a razor sharp focus on God's will and how we acknowledge the rule of God in our lives.

Listen once again to how the prayer is recorded in Luke: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.

The words are a little different than what we say each Sunday, but all the key points are there. First we honor the name of God. Perhaps when we do that we should pause for a moment – not rush along – hallowed be your name – held sacred, acknowledged as holy – not a vulgar name used to curse but a precious name used to bless. Pause and be reverent in the awesome power the one you address in prayer.

Second we pray that God's righteous will would govern our lives and our world. That is the meaning of the Kingdom – the place where God's will is clear and evident and the controlling force. We say this by use of a parallel phrase in our liturgy – thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

To pray that God's will be done, and not our own, is not always natural for us. This is where sin and the doctrine of original sin comes in - meaning that we're tempted to want our own way, no matter what, most of the time – and that this little item on our personal agenda can even be right under the surface of our most altruistic moments – not to mention it being a shameless motivator adopting many disguises and producing much suffering and tragedy in the world.

So there is something in our nature that stands in the way of putting God's will first – and thus the need, as Jesus says, to die to self and be born again in the Spirit. It is, to say the least, an on-going struggle to move from self-centeredness to righteousness.

Having honored the name of God and prayed that God's will be done, we next pray for our bread – but qualified in a way – we pray for our daily bread; not stockpiles, not storehouses, not what we need down the road, but our daily bread. It has a startling simplicity about it that captures quite a bit of what Jesus teaches about our right relationship to material possessions and the goods of the earth. It's a prayer of need, not of greed – a prayer of faith, not of fear.

Again we hear echoes of the Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' - do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

And just as in a simple phrase of prayer Jesus moves us away from natural worries about the future, he also moves us from natural anger over events in the past into a spirit of forgiveness: forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. Is that a fact or is that a challenge? It is natural to pray for forgiveness, but what about forgiveness that requires something of us? That is a call to righteousness.

Finally there is a request to be spared a time of trial – that's really the better translation than the word temptation. It means being spared from a terribly difficult circumstance which could cause us to betray all that we have just prayed for – to renounce the will of God and renounce the integrity of who we strive to be as people.

In the end, maybe we should call this the Disciples prayer rather than the Lord's prayer, because it has outlines for us the path of righteousness we who pray in the name of Jesus Christ are called to walk.

In the Beatitudes Jesus says:

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

This prayer, the Lord's prayer, is an expression of that hunger and thirst – it is this kind of prayer that will always be answered, for the door to do the right thing will always open for us if we but ask, seek, and knock.

Let us pray:

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Deliver not only us, O Lord, but all your children from pain, suffering, loneliness, anxiety, and fear. Especially our prayers are with:

And those we name in the quiet of our hearts.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.