

# Sermon: Pentecost 10

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Year C

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138

Colossians 2:6-15

Luke 11:1-13

There's an ancient spiritual tradition in the East... that when you want something... you need to ask three times... if you ask only once... it may be just a whim... something you didn't really want... or value that much... I've heard about this in the context of seeking initiation into certain mysteries... seeking admission into Buddhist monasteries... and in Judaism... according to information I found on a well-known Jewish website... if someone wants to convert to Judaism... and asks the rabbi... according to Jewish law... the rabbi must say "No" the first three times... but if that person persists... the rabbi should agree to do it... or refer that person to one who will...

So here's Abraham... asking *more than three times* about the fate of Sodom... the text says that he remained standing before the Lord... and then he came near... came nearer to God... face to face... and toe to toe with God... and he proceeds to negotiate with God on behalf of this place... he becomes... in effect... a *satan*...

[say-tan]... an accuser against God... and says: *Are you really going to do this? Are you really going to sweep away the righteous with the unrighteous... are you really going to throw away the baby with the bathwater... are you really going to discount the value of fifty righteous people as nothing... and destroy them too...*

And God considers... and replies... *Well... no... if I find fifty righteous souls... I'll spare the whole place...*

Then we can almost hear the weight of what Abraham has just done come crashing down into his awareness... we can almost feel the hot sick feeling in his stomach as the gears shift... as he realizes that he is David... and God is Goliath... and he really has nothing... to back up his expectation... not even a slingshot... but he continues... he

persists... and by the time Abraham gets to forty... he must be thinking: *This isn't so bad...* by the time he gets to thirty... he must be thinking: *My God is an awesome God...* by the time he gets to ten... he must be thinking: *God really does love us...*

I know... I think we all know... that lovely feeling of being safe and snuggled in bed... especially when a frigid wind is blowing outside... snuggled and warm and not wanting to get up for anything... well... we'd get up if we think we left the stove on... but not for lots of other things that we know could wait until morning...

A couple of years after I graduated from college... when I was still living in Gainesville... one morning at about 2:30... someone came knocking on our door... knocking loudly... and yelling "Let me in!"... woke us up... we looked out of that little peephole in the door... and before too long it became clear that the guy there had had too much to drink... and he thought he was upstairs at his girlfriend's apartment... that may be why she kicked him out... but do you think we opened the door... no way...

So it may be easier to understand why... once this man in our Gospel was safe and warm... and needing to protect his children... why the man in bed was not about to get up for a friend asking for bread... but his friend's persistence paid off... he must have asked three times...

Today's Gospel begins with the disciples asking Jesus to teach them how to pray the way John taught his disciples... and in Luke... the Lord's Prayer is only 38 words compared to its longer counterpart in Matthew's Gospel at 57 words... Fr. Robert Capon wrote: when I put those two facts together... they suggest to me that Jesus' intention in giving such a short prayer... is to go along with the request... while at the same time denying it... or at least holding up a warning hand... Jesus has already distanced himself considerably from the program of salvation as envisioned by John... which was in effect... works righteousness...

For John... redemption came from placing oneself in a position of ethical... religious... and political uprightness... as a way of ensuring membership in the coming kingdom...

For Jesus... the kingdom has already happened... and has happened for everyone... in the [catholic] mystery of which he himself is the sacramental embodiment... Jesus is apparently convinced by now... that no human achievements... either religious or moral... can bring in the Kingdom... and he gives only the barest bones of a prayer... in which the only human action held up for imitation... in which the only hoped for transformation... is forgiveness...

In Family Systems... we understand guilt to be the emotion which lets us know that we have done something wrong... and need to seek forgiveness... and we understand shame to be the emotion which lets us know that we have exceeded our familiar human limits and have wandered into God's realm... but the Gk. word which has been translated as persistent... also means shameless... which in this context means: acting like God... and the one knocking at the door was shameless... like the prophets... holding God accountable to what God said God would do...

And Abraham acts like God... stands like an equal... looks God in the face... as it were... and advocates on behalf of those who don't know what they're doing... like Jesus did... on behalf of those who deserve God's forgiveness... and for those who don't... like the rain that falls on the righteous and the unrighteous...

In the Gospel... we are given a comparable example of persistence... but certainly not for three loaves of bread... but for the bread of forgiveness... that we must ask for daily...

Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about how the church is still the one familiar landmark where the weary traveller comes... by midnight... it is the one house which stands where it has always stood... the many who come and knock are desperately seeking a

little bread to tide them over... they are seeking the bread of social justice... but all too often... the doors are locked... and they have either been ignored altogether... or told to wait until later... which almost always means never...

And one of the shameful tragedies of history... is that the very institution which should remove all people from the midnight of racial segregation... or any other social injustice... participates in creating and perpetuating this midnight... and in this country... and around the world... there are many midnights to which the church has locked her doors... because it is expedient... and earns us other things...

But here's an interesting thing... it can be easy... in our human arrogance... to think that Abraham convinces God to spare Sodom... it can be easy to believe that God is enlightened by the logic in Abraham's argument... and concedes... but maybe the story is intended solely... for Abraham... and us... to discover how compassionate God already is... how forgiving God already is... and for us to realize how forgiving we are not... and maybe the next question... is whether we want to ask God for something only once... and if we don't get it... to feel justified and give up... or do we really want to be changed by God... are we persistent... are we willing to be shameless... and stand toe to toe with God... so that the Burning Bush can burn away everything that keeps us from burning in the same way...

A father asked his young daughter... whether she wanted a playhouse... or a pony... she said: *A pony!* The father asked again... would you like a playhouse... or a pony... she said: *A pony!* The father asked one more time... she said: *A playhouse I guess...* the father said: *That's great. That's what I can give you!*

So are we willing to ask God for what God can give us... instead of what we want God to give us... are we willing to let the Spirit pray for us even when we have run out of words to say... are we willing to let God cling to us... even when we've lost the strength to hold on to God... are we willing to let God forgive us...