

# Sermon: Pentecost 7

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Year C

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138

Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)

Luke 11:1-13

Two weeks ago... the Gospel story we heard about The Good Samaritan... was about hospitality... some who made excuses to not be hospitable... and an Outsider... who acted like a neighbor... last week's Gospel... about Martha and Mary... was about hospitality... but also about listening to God's Word... and today's reading from Genesis is about a lack of hospitality... God tells Abraham that God will come down to see just how great the sin against Sodom and Gomorrah really is... and while this sin is popularly believed to be homosexuality... nothing is said about how the crowd intended to abuse and rape Lot's guests... no one questioned Lot when he said... *Look... I have two daughters who have not known a man... let me bring them out to you... and do to them as you please...* but Ezekiel... in Ch.16:49... explained that the sin of Sodom was really the cities' lack of hospitality... their unwillingness... due to their pride and haughtiness... to share their excess food... and prosperous ease... with those who were poor and marginalized...

Yet even so... in v. 25... Abraham calls God out... and reminds God that God saves the righteous... as God did with Noah and his family before the Great Flood... and Abraham acts as a neighbor to the righteous in these two cities... and defends them... challenges God... *far be it from you to destroy the righteous with the wicked...* Abraham holds God's feet to the fire... holds God accountable... as the prophets did... and he bargains with God on behalf of however many righteous there are... and even if there may be only ten... God agrees to spare the cities... and Abraham's interaction with God reflects his intimacy with his Creator... and a confidence in their relationship... a confidence that's not always exhibited in this kind of human / divine dialogue...

There's a similar kind of dialogue... a similar kind of intimacy... in the story Jesus shares about the man who comes at midnight... on behalf of a friend... who's just arrived... in an ancient culture without instantaneous communication and without all-night grocery stores... it's not difficult to imagine being surprised by the arrival of an unexpected guest... and caught without the supplies needed for even basic hospitality... but there's a clue that this friend may not have arrived alone... when you ask for three loaves of bread... especially when you wake someone up at midnight... it's probably because you need to feed more than one new mouth... because traveling alone was dangerous enough... but at night... even more so... so you didn't travel alone... and caring for travelers... was often a community event... so you might ask one neighbor for bread... and another for cheese... and another for meat... if those were things you needed...

ELCA Pastor and seminary professor Brian Peterson... writes... a crucial element in understanding this story can be found in v. 8... the Greek word that's translated as *persistence*... occurs only one other time in scripture... in the Septuagint... in the Greek version of the Jewish scriptures... in Sirach 25:22... and the word doesn't actually mean *persistence*... it seems that the translators have been influenced by this Gospel's vv. 9-10... about asking... and searching... and knocking... and may have also been influenced by the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18... the widow who pesters the unjust judge until he gives her justice...

But what's problematic... is that translating the word as *persistence*... may imply that God is reluctant... unaware... or in need of being roused by our prayers... before God will do anything... it may imply that prayer is the means by which we harass God until God finally submits to doing what we want... but the notion that we must bang on the doors of heaven until we catch God's attention... is an inappropriate theology of prayer...

A better option for translating this Greek word... would be *shamelessness*... meaning a lack of sensitivity to what is proper... or a willful lack of concern about acquiring public shame... the question then becomes... whose "shamelessness" is the reason for the sleeper to get up and give what is requested... is the petitioner shameless for begging in the middle of the night... or would the sleeper be shameless for not getting up to help...

New Testament professor Walter Liefeld makes a helpful suggestion about this parable and its dynamic of shame... the petitioner indeed acts with shameless disregard for his neighbor... and perhaps of the other neighbors who will witness this midnight disturbance... but the focus quickly shifts to the one in bed... because although the petitioner acts in a shameful way... his neighbor deals with the shame in a way that will bring honor to them both...

*Lord... teach us to pray...* I have a collection of eleven versions of the Lord's Prayer... today's from Luke... one from Matthew... the contemporary one we say together... the traditional one we used to say together... one that's a literal translation from the Greek... one from the New Zealand Prayer Book... a feminist one... the Presbyterian one... and some others... and so when Jesus teaches... does he teach us the right words to say... like a magic spell... so we get what we ask for... or does he teach us the right things for which we ought to ask... are prayers like making a wish when we blow out birthday candles... or like putting a quarter in a vending machine... do prayers change God's mind about us... or our minds about God...

No... it will not do... to think that prayer works either because we continue to hound God about something... or because we are so shameless in our asking... we are not the key that makes prayer work... if we keep asking... seeking... and knocking... it is only because God has done so with us first... and continues to do so... and so we need to keep vv. 9-13 in mind... about the fish... and the egg... and the snake... and scorpion... to help us understand this parable... and consider how much more a giver of

good gifts God is... than we are... and consider what it is that God wants for us... compared to those things we want for ourselves...

And let's remember... every good thing that Jesus does... he does after prayer... he has confidence in going to God... and each and every time... he does God's will... not his own... and the golden nugget in this reading... is hidden in plain sight... in the last line... about asking for... and receiving the Holy Spirit... the same Spirit which according to Romans 8:26... *helps us in our weakness... for we do not know how to pray as we ought... but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words...*

All eleven versions ask for the same thing... your kingdom come... let your will come true in the universe just as on earth... create your reign of unity now, your one desire then acts with ours... your will come to be as in the heavens so also on the earth... your will be done in all the spaces in which you dwell... the way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world...

Here comes Jesus saying... keep asking... keep seeking... keep knocking... for all people... keep giving fish and eggs to those who hunger... but some people give scorpions and snakes... or they ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance... but follow it only if it's not too inconvenient for them... if it doesn't mean that they have to change too much... or that society has to... or that they have to look past our laws to the Truths which lie beyond them...

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about truth... and about this challenging tension... he wrote the Serenity Prayer... which some of us know through twelve-step groups... but few of us know... that the version we know... is an abbreviated one... so here it is... as Niebuhr wrote it...

God, give us grace to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things which should be changed,  
And the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.  
Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make all things right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with You forever, in the next.  
And the people said... **Amen.**

Mike+