

Prayer that Sustains

[Genesis 18:20-32](#)

[Colossians 2:6-15, \(16-19\)](#)

[Luke 11:1-13](#)

This morning I am going to be talking about prayer, but I want to get there by way of the Old Testament reading, to remind you that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was a severe lack of hospitality which extended to homosexual rape. We know that rape is a form of domination and that both heterosexual and homosexual rape is sadly common in situations of war or at any time when men wish to display their supremacy. In the story of the destruction of these two towns, God makes it quite clear that behavior which demeans another human being is an anathema. And I am sure that that includes lynching, the atrocities of modern warfare, and killing thousands of people with an atom bomb. To be very clear, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has nothing to do with gay or trans people or our relationships.

I imagine we are given this reading today to demonstrate a particular kind of prayer. Abraham is almost arguing with God. He is as persistent as the man in Jesus' parable who needs food late at night – he needs food to provide hospitality – the very thing that the men of Sodom and Gomorrah withheld. Yet despite their failings, Abraham argues that God being just should not destroy the cities if he can find a few good men living there, and God agrees.

Apparently Abraham succeeds in changing God's mind.

Now this story provides a particular image of God which is not so helpful to our 21st century minds. If God can destroy Sodom and Gomorrah then surely he could have prevented the destruction of the town of Paradise by fire or the bombing of countless cities in Syria and Ukraine. But we know that is not the way God acts. A God who sits in

the clouds and directs human and natural behavior is no longer a useful idea.

But that does not mean that God is powerless. God is working in every situation to help us find the best possible outcome. This world is broken. Things happen. There are terrible accidents, terrible natural disasters and terrible human-made suffering. That is part of our reality. But God is within every part of that reality bringing hope and bringing healing. It is our choice whether we listen to and look for the best possible outcome for all beings in alignment with God's will.

I think this is absolutely key – our aligning our will with God's. And God's will is for all beings to be reconciled with each other and with God, for all beings to flourish and know the joy of their own true nature. As we are able to let go of our own selfish behaviors, as we are able to think of the good of the community not just of ourselves, and as we are able to see the community as including all beings, so we become more Christ-like; and as we become more Christ-like so our desires naturally align with those of God and then we will see more clearly the way that God is working and so our prayers will become more effective.

From this perspective, Abraham is not arguing with God: Abraham is aligning his energy with God's to bring about the best possible solution for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. And God is changed by God's interaction with Abraham. God is changed by God's interaction with us just as we are changed by our interaction with God. Prayer changes things because it brings our positive energy into a situation and gives God more to work with.

In the gospel reading, one of Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray. I wonder what they were really asking? They had the example of Abraham and Moses, they had the prayers contained in the Psalms and all the temple prayers. I don't think anyone needs to learn how to pray

the “O God help me with this problem,” kind of prayer. I suspect they saw Jesus praying and they longed to pray like him. They saw that after he took times for prayer he would be refreshed and renewed and they too wanted that refreshment and re-energizing.

The prayer that Jesus suggested is quite short. In Matthew’s gospel it is longer and it was later expanded by the church so this is not quite the same as the prayer we have today. Let’s look at what Jesus actually says in this gospel.

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.

How is this a prayer that sustains?

I think it sustains and it re-energizes because it brings us into greater alignment with God, it moves us toward becoming Christ-like.

The first part establishes our relationship with God – “Holy One we are in intimate relationship with you even as we worship you and work for the full embodiment of your will, your completed creation.” To me this is a relief – I do not have the ultimate responsibility - I am dependent upon God and the working out of God’s purpose in every dimension. Amazingly, I can rest in the awesome presence of the Holy Spirit. This is life-giving, this is powerful – resting in God’s presence, abiding in the One. In that place there is nothing, nothing we need do because all is complete.

“Give us each day our daily bread” continues this idea of resting in God’s grace and goodness. Now there is a challenge here in knowing exactly what Jesus meant. Both Matthew and Luke were written in Greek and both of them use a word that appears nowhere else in Greek texts either secular or religious. It is a combination of two words which

we might translate literally as “above substance” but ‘Give us each day our above substance bread’ makes no apparent sense. Perhaps we can think of it as more than substance or even super-essential. So perhaps our daily bread is not just the basic food we need but all that we need spiritually, mentally and physically for sustenance and creativity.

This acknowledges our dependence upon God. In our human pride and self-sufficiency we might think that we can do what’s necessary to put bread on the table without any help, thank you. But ultimately we cannot make or keep life. Life is gift from God and so we ask “give us our life and all that sustains it each day.”

And now the prayer changes. “Forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone”. This is where we align ourselves with Christ. It is not, I think, that God’s forgiveness is dependent on ours but that we are letting go of our inherent self-centeredness and entering into the life of the Godhead as we consciously and intentionally lay down our self-righteous indignation, our carefully calibrated grudges and our curated memories of hurt. We let go of them as we enter into the life of Christ in the cross, “Lord forgive them for they know not what they are doing.”

It is this conscious alignment with Christ which is the key that unlocks the secret of prayer. Because when we are living our true nature in Christ, then when we ask it will be given, we shall find what we seek and doors will be opened. And conversely, it is prayer that leads us into oneness with Christ. We are changed by resting in God, we are changed by abiding in Christ.

And finally, “do not bring us to the time of trial.” This reminds me of Jesus praying at Gethsemane, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” (Matt.26:39) We all want to be spared. We do not walk willingly into danger or suffering yet it is part of our human experience, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

As you know, I have been ill these last few weeks. Probably as ill as I have ever been in my life up until now. And one of the gifts of that time was that I started to use a prayer app. It’s called “Pray as you go” and is

based in Ignatian practice. Each day it provides some music, a short reading and invites you to pray. If the prayer that sustains is new to you or difficult for you, I suggest you give it a trail run. Use it for a week or two and see whether it helps you to go deeper into Christ.

Because the invitation is always there. The Holy Spirit is always inviting us to come in deeper. And who are we to refuse God's invitation?