

Persistent in Prayer

A Sermon for Proper 12 (17) C

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Two of our three readings are about prayer, in some form -- the First Testament reading from Genesis and the Gospel reading from Luke, which gives Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. I want to talk about both these texts in a minute; first, I want to say a few words about prayer, personal prayer, that is, not the corporate prayer we take part in when we take part in the liturgy on a Sunday morning. It's not something that you hear spoken about much from the pulpit, or at least I have heard only a few sermons on prayer in my time in the pews.

I think there are two reasons for that. One is that it is hard to talk about without sounding pious and 'churchy', and we all know, I think, that we fall short of the mark on a lot of things, particularly our prayer life. And that's because of the second reason it's hard to talk about prayer -- prayer is in and of itself hard. Prayer is about communication with God. It's how we establish and then develop our relationship with the God we come to know through Jesus. Whether we are praying to God the Father, or to Jesus himself, or to the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the one who has

opened up the relationship through his words and actions as communicated to us in the Gospels. This is the great message of John's Gospel, that it is Jesus who has opened up for us a way into the familial relationship between Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier that lies at the heart of God. Establishing a relationship with God, however we do so, is going to be one of the toughest things that we, as human beings do. Stretching our limited human consciousness to try to touch the divine consciousness is not easy.

In fact communication with another person is always hard -- even when the other person is not a Person of the Triune God. And even though most of us come to prayer through petition -- asking God for help or for things that we need -- as we grow more deeply into prayer we discover that there is a lot more to it than simple petition, important as it is. We find out that, as with all communication, the hard part is not the talking, but the listening. Prayer includes learning to listen to what God has to say to us -- resting in silence and waiting for God to speak, to touch our heart, to answer what we are saying to God.

We often speak as though we are restricting God's answer to prayer to just giving us what we asked for. But of course that is far from all. Even in communication among human beings it wouldn't be much of a relationship if all you did was ask the other person for something and then wait with your hands out! No, God replies to us, to our prayer, in many ways -- often in the quiet places and times of our souls, as we come before God in meditative prayer or look for answers to our dilemmas or our troubles.

What do the readings today contribute to our understanding of prayer? In the reading from Genesis, Abraham is concerned about his nephew Lot, who has moved to the Cities of the Plain district, Sodom and Gomorrah. The two did not part completely happily, and don't seem to be on good terms, but Abraham does not want the Cities of the Plain destroyed with his nephew

and his family in them. So he has a conversation with God -- more than that, he argues with God. Surely God wouldn't destroy the Cities if they contain 50 righteous inhabitants! How would that look - shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just? And so Abraham bargains God down, till he gets to 10: surely God won't destroy the Cities if they contain 10 of the righteous!

How can Abraham do this? How does an ordinary mortal dare to bargain with God?

Well, he clearly has lots of chutzpah! Seriously, this takes nerve. But it also requires an assured relationship with God. Abraham is respectful of God but at the same time he is not afraid to press God with his own requests and concerns. We learn three important things about prayer here. First, that conversation with God is an act of prayer. When we speak with God, we are praying. So even when -- or maybe especially when -- our talks with God are unplanned and spontaneous, not part of our daily prayer routine, we are engaged in prayer. And I think God's response to Abraham shows that God likes the give and take of conversation with us.

Second, we learn that it is okay to be persistent in prayer: Abraham will not let go of his point and he pursues the LORD with it. The LORD's response is not to be angry but to acknowledge Abraham's arguments when he makes good ones. This part of the conversation, in which God encourages Abraham to argue with him, shows how much God likes to be in conversation with us.

Third, the story shows that things do not always turn out exactly the way we want them to when we pray: we don't get the whole story here, but suffice it to say that the Cities of the Plain are in fact destroyed and although Lot and some of his family are saved from that destruction, he does not come out of the story well, on account of his behaviour before, during, and after his rescue. So Abraham gets some of what he wants, but not all of it, and not the way he wanted it. This can happen to any of us in prayer too.

The Gospel reading has more to teach us. It starts with Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, which comes to us both in Matthew's Gospel and here in Luke. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is shorter than the more familiar version in Matthew, and the wording is slightly different. Some scholars think Luke's version reflects a tradition that was more focussed on living in the "in-between time", the time between Jesus' coming as Messiah and the Day of the Lord, while Matthew's version is more concentrated on the nearness of the End-time. Be that as it may, the recollection in Luke's tradition of the Lord's Prayer suggests some important truths about prayer.

We learn from this account of prayer that it is a good thing to ask for God's help in prayer: the disciples asked to be taught to pray, as John the Baptist had taught his disciples to pray. God knows that prayer is hard for us and God is ready to help! More important, though, is that the context of this story about the Lord's Prayer echoes the point made in the Abraham story about persistent prayer. We should be not just persistent but constant in prayer -- look at the parable of the unwilling friend and the loaves of bread! No we must ask, search, and knock on the door. If we do so, our questions will be answered, the objects of our search revealed, and doors opened. Jesus' words affirm to us that we will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit if we are persistent and constant in prayer. And the Holy Spirit is key to the life that St Paul describes in Colossians: there is no other way to continue to live our lives in Jesus the Messiah except with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate promised by Jesus himself.

So we need to be constant in prayer, in season and out of season. Originally this was Paul's advice to Timothy about preaching, that he should preach the Word "in season and out of season". But it applies equally well to prayer. Perhaps even better because we can all pray, and pray more persistently than any of us could preach. One result of such a prayer life (which I am

still far short of attaining) is the ability to also be persistent in living a life of action for God's Kingdom. Prayer and action are not opposed; rather, they reinforce one another. So let us be constant in our conversation with and awareness of God and the Lord with whom we were raised through faith in the power of God, and constant also in the work of God's kingdom. Amen.