

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text —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

"Prayer," the great Rabbi, Abraham Heschel wrote, "is an invitation to God to intervene in our lives, to let God's will prevail in our affairs; it is the opening of a window to God in our will, an effort to make God the Lord of our soul."

The gospel of Luke tells us that before every major decision and every major event, Jesus went away to pray. Jesus found prayer vital. The disciples sensed the vitality of Jesus' prayer life and one day pleaded with him to, "Teach us to pray." Jesus obliged them, and provided what we call the Lord's Prayer.

The first thing Jesus did was to tell them how to address God. When you pray say, "Father..." To Jesus, Father is not a metaphor. It is a name. (Remember, we baptize in the NAME of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit). God is not like a Father, God is Father. More than 70 times Jesus calls God Father (Abba) in Matthew, Mark and Luke...and 120 times in the Gospel of John.

It isn't, however, the name that is crucial, it is the relationship. In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther tells us what this means. "Here God encourages us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children. We therefore are to pray to him with complete confidence just as children speak to their loving father." For those who grew up with a loving father, they can imagine that God is like a good father--strong, loving and wise. Others are invited to see God as the loving Father they never had.

Prayer is not primarily about getting things from God but rather about the relationship we have with God. We are invited to make all of our needs, wants, hurts, hopes, and desires known to God. It often begins when we discover we have a great hole in our existence, a hole we have attempted to fill through a variety of ways. We pray not because we are full, not because we have it all together, but because we are empty. Prayer is a cry for God.

By the way, you don't have to be clever to pray. Anne Lamott writes in *Traveling Mercies* that her two favorite prayers are, "help me, help me, help me" and "thank you, thank you, thank you" (p. 82).

Even though we know something about prayer, there is more that we don't know. We know that effort is more important than technique. We know that prayer is key to the life of Jesus, and therefore ought to be very important to us. But, we need to be honest. What we don't know, for example, is why some prayers are answered in the affirmative and some are not. We don't know why many prayers for healing bring no results. We don't know why some sense God's answer and others do not. Still, we press on, praying because Jesus urged us to do so.

In many professions those involved have a signature piece that they do. I once was on a TV program with the singer Richie Havens. Before the cameras began to roll he asked the director, "What is it that you want me to do?"

The director said, "Do what you are famous for." And he did. He sang what he sang at Woodstock, "Here comes the sun." It was his signature piece.

When I worked at a summer camp for kids from East Harlem boys would say to each other, "Show me how you dance." The other boy would start dancing, displaying his steps. He had a signature dance step. The dance was his identity.

Just as musicians, storytellers, and dancers have a signature piece evidently, so did Jewish Rabbis during the time of Jesus. They had a signature prayer. It identified them. It summarized their teaching. What we call, "The Lord's Prayer," is the signature piece of Jesus. It tells us about him. It summarizes his teaching. We pray it often because it comes from the mouth of our Lord, and it summarizes his teaching. If you want to understand Jesus, you should understand his prayer. Not only do we learn how to address God, we learn to expect God's involvement in life (your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven). We learn that we are to be grateful for the gifts of food, clothing, home and family (Give us this day our daily bread). We learn about the power and need for forgiveness (forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us). When you pray this prayer, you are using the words that Jesus himself deemed most important. The Lord's Prayer is a great teacher.

When Jesus finished giving the disciples the Lord's Prayer he continued his teaching. He urged people to be persistent in their praying. Using an illustration comparing the lesser to the greater, (if the lesser would do nice things how much more will God do). Speaking of persistence, we are reminded of the great conversation between God and Abraham.

Let me back up. On my first trip to the Holy Land I was shopping in Jerusalem one day and saw this sign: Haggle with the Arab and make him poor. Haggling, of course, is a way of life in the market places of the Middle East. I was uncomfortable with bartering, or haggling, and so initially didn't do it. I found a object I liked and if the stated price was one I could afford, I bought it.

Toward the end of my three week stay I still had one goal – to purchase a large wooden crèche. I went from store to store and finally found one that I liked...I looked at it, received a price, smiled and left. I went to two more stores and then returned the next day. The merchant immediately recognized me and stated his price again. I said, "Too much" and started walking away. He followed me out the door and urged me to come back. "What are you willing to pay?" he asked.

I gave him a price and he said, "Too little." I walked away again. He followed me, lowering his price. After another set of exchanges I purchased it.

Back in my room I told my friend George what had happened. He said, "Go back and read Genesis 18." I did. The process seemed similar. God announced to Abraham that he planned to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, because of the evil persons there. Abraham was amazed and approached God like a man approached a merchant. "Will you indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city, will you not spare it for the sake of the 50 righteous? God said, "If I find 50 righteous in Sodom I will spare the entire city for the sake of the 50."

Abraham wasn't done, "I am nothing, but I have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord so I ask, what if five of the 50 righteous were missing. Would you destroy the entire city?" God answered, "I will not destroy the city if I find 45."

Abraham asked what would happen if God found 40...then 30...then 20. Each time God agreed to Abraham's offer. Finally, Abraham asked, "What if there are ten found there?" And God replied, "I will not destroy Sodom for the sake of ten righteous." And Abraham walked away. Abraham knew that God is holy and that God is good, and that God is just. He was asking God to be God. He haggled, reminding God of what God had promised. O Lord, you are merciful. Your steadfast love endures forever. You must be willing for the sake of a small number to save a community, even though it is largely populated with guilty people. God, you must be more concerned with those few who obey you than the mass who ignore you.

Elie Wiesel has written, "God enjoys being defeated by his children." It appears to be so, because, unlike the Mid-Eastern merchant, God never counters Abraham's offer. What I find interesting is that Abraham gave up at 10. Any good bargainer keeps going until he hits the rock bottom price. Abraham never heard a no. How much lower would God go? The answer to that question took place 1800 years later on a hill outside of Jerusalem, where the son of God hung on a cross. It was then that we discovered that God was willing not only to save Sodom, but the entire world for the sake of a single righteous man. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him, will not perish, but have everlasting life.

It is on the cross that we discover that the persistence in prayer was not for the sake of God, whose desire to save everyone was there from the beginning, but the persistence in prayer – in haggling, was for the sake of Abraham.

Perhaps we need to be constant in prayer...persistent, asking, seeking, knocking, because we are not yet ready to receive. The goal of prayer is not to change God, but to change us. The goal of prayer is to get us ready to receive the blessings that God has so richly prepared for us.

All of what I have just said assumes a relationship. You don't haggle the same way with a total stranger. It takes time. It takes friendship. Abraham knew God, and could counter God's statement because he knew God.

We are invited to see God as a caring parent. We are invited to speak to God just as we speak to our loving parent. We are invited to trust God, just as we trust a loving parent. Though we don't like it, we assume that when our loving parent says YES, she has our best interests in mind, and we assume that when she or he says NO, the same thing is true.

These words are not about technique. They are not about method. They simply urge us to pray, and pray often. Speak to God as we speak to one we know and love. Let us pray:

Dear God, please untie the knots that are in my mind,
my heart and my life.

Remove the have nots, the can nots and the do nots,
that I have in my mind.

Erase the will nots, the may nots,
the might nots that find a home in my heart.

Release me from the could nots, would nots and the should nots
that obstruct my life.

And most of all dear God I ask you to remove from my mind, my heart and my life all the am nots that I have allowed to hold me back, especially the thought that I am not good enough.

Amen. © 2010