

The Bethel Pulpit

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BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11: 1-4

Please join me in a word of prayer: Quiet in our hearts any voice but your own. You promise always to listen to us as we come to you in prayer. Help us listen to and respond to you, in all your ways of speaking to us. By your Spirit, grant that the words that we speak with our lips, we believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, give us the courage to proclaim and live out in our lives. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Jesus, tender shepherd hear me,
Bless your little lamb tonight;
In the darkness, please be near me,
Keep me safe 'til morning light.

Seeing I am Jesus' lamb, ever glad of heart I am,
For my shepherd, kind and good,
Who provides me daily food.
He who loves me, knows my name,
And forever is the same.

Do you know those prayers? Those are two of my childhood, bed-time prayers...and I think they only mean more to me now, than ever before. They are not quite as 'famous' as:

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul
to keep,
If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul
to take.

How frequently I find myself praying this familiar
prayer with a child of God on their deathbed.
What is YOUR favorite prayer? Have you taught it to
your children? Your grandchildren?

Both of our readings today are about prayer. In Genesis, we hear Abraham interceding with God for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus, in Luke, has been praying and as the disciples sit with him, they ask him to teach them to pray. And so he does.

I wonder if Jesus knew how seriously we would take this prayer and how often we

I would much rather spend our time praying together than talking **about** prayer. It's difficult to talk about prayer: something so simple as our bedtime prayers, and yet so deep a mystery to many of us who strive to walk with and follow Jesus.

Is prayer a mystery for you? Have you heard the questions...or asked them yourself: does prayer really 'work'? Does prayer change God or does prayer change us, the ones who pray? Why does it seem as though some prayers are never answered? Why are some people healed and others not?

When I was in junior high, one of my uncles had heart surgery. We all prayed for his healing. In those days, patients shared a room, and the person in the other bed had exactly the same surgery. My uncle lived another 20 years. The other patient died on the operating table. My uncle always said: I'm so glad God was with me and answered our prayers. Even as a teen-ager, I wondered about the other patient: didn't he pray hard enough?

Now my life went on and on....and I'm in seminary. My younger brother was plagued by the distress of being seriously bi-polar. Lon was a believer. Lon was a devout pray-er. We all prayed for Lon to be healed...for many years we prayed. In desperation,

Lon decides to get re-baptized, 'cause he thought maybe THAT was what God wanted him to do. So he gets re-baptized...and says to me that night: Margo, I'm all healed ! I can feel it ! I'm finally normal.

But that was not the reality. Questions, Questions, inside of the mystery of prayer. These and other experiences have given me a new favorite prayer:

Lord, you call your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us.

Many times now, I have said to you that I believe the primary purpose of the Bible is to tell us who God is and what God is like. As I read the Genesis account of Abraham , praying so fervently for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and as I pray the Lord's Prayer, given to us by Jesus, I have to ask: what do I learn about God from these stories?

Abraham, in Genesis gives us a powerful lesson about his relationship with God. What does Abraham know about God, as he dares to come back, time after time, asking for God to have mercy on the righteous people of Sodom and Gomorrah? With the audacity of his shameless bargaining with God: would you save the city if we found 50 righteous? How about 45..or 40? 30? 20? 10? Abraham experiences a God who is impacted by conversation with human beings, a God who changes his mind, based on the human request. This is a God whom Abraham totally trusts: one who will listen and one who will respond.

When I pray the Lord's prayer, I am reminded that God is the one who sustains us from day to day: Give us this day our daily bread; that the God to whom I am praying is a forgiving God: Forgive us our sins; and that God is my protector: Save me from the time of trial.

In the midst of all the mystery about the efficacy and/or the ways that God responds to our prayers, I hope we remember two things: it's more important to pray than to talk about praying and remember that Jesus is our praying example. Jesus prayed all the time, even in the garden of Gethsemene, asking God to stop the horrendous ordeal of his suffering. We close with prayer:

Lord, listen to your children praying;
Lord, send your Spirit from above.

Lord, listen to your children praying;
send us love, send us pow'r, send us grace.