

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 24, 2016
Pentecost 10
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 18:20-33
Psalm 138
Colossians 2:6-15
Luke 11:1-13

As you look more closely at our Scripture lessons for today, a thematic connection begins to appear, especially with respect to the Old Testament lesson and the Gospel.

Both of these lessons are connected by the theme of prayer -- more specifically, intercessory prayer or persistent prayer. The old timers used to refer to these kinds of persistent prayers as “prayers of importunity.”

The word “importunate” in the dictionary is defined as: “overly persistent in a request or demand.” And both the Old Testament and the Gospel reveal to us this kind of persistence.

In fact, verse 8 in the Gospel lesson can be difficult to translate, especially the phrase “if you keep knocking long enough.” The NIV renders it “boldness,” and other translations render it as “persistence.”

But one scholar argues that the Greek term here that is typically translated as “persistence” or “boldness” would be more accurately rendered as “shameless.” His point is that our prayers to God should be “bold, audacious, and unfailingly confident.” [Cf. David Lose, www.davidlose.net, July 24, 2016]

On the surface, it might appear that the upshot of these stories is that God only responds to us if we nag him like children who want something from their parents. I don't think that is the case.

Rather, both Luke and the writer of Genesis seem to be placing before us an *analogy*. The point seems to be that if parents respond to the persistent requests of their children, how much more will God respond to us, especially when we pray "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."

Take, for example, the story of Abraham and the impending destruction of the city of Sodom in today's Old Testament lesson.

It can be quite easy for us to read this story with our sole focus on God's judgment of this city. But there is more to the story than that. Notice what is happening.

It took me several years to notice that Abraham is not merely asking God to spare the minority group of righteous people in Sodom. Abraham is asking God to spare the *entire city* because of those few righteous ones. Here is a true intercessor, praying "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."

This shows us also the degree to which God is involved trying to bring a world that is broken and lost back to Himself. It shows us the extent to which God will go to save and redeem lives and situations that look hopeless to human eyes.

In fact, for the sake of the *one* just Man, Jesus, God spared the city of

humankind from destruction, nailing the debt of our sin to the Cross. This is the message of the Apostle Paul to the Colossians this morning.

Yet it is easy for us to read the Old Testament passage and to conclude, “There is no hope for Sodom.” And then by analogy, we look at events or relationships in our own lives and we conclude, “There is no hope for this situation.”

There is no hope for this dead-end job...

There is no hope for this marriage...

There is no hope for this wayward child...

There is no hope for my broken life...

There is no hope for our country....

It is in moments like these when we must remember something: The word “hopeless” is not in God’s vocabulary.

Do you remember the passage just preceding this in Genesis? It’s where the messengers tell Abraham that God is going to fulfill his promise to give Sarah a son, even though she is almost 100 years old.

And she laughs...

Then the messenger says, “Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for God?”

Brothers and sisters, you may have things or circumstances in your life today

that you consider hopeless, but God doesn't look at them that way. Abraham did not believe Sodom was beyond help, hope, or the reach of God's merciful grace. And so, like a child relating to a parent, he interceded. He persisted in prayer.

Let me ask you today: What situation or circumstance in your life just now appears to be beyond the reach of God's grace and mercy? Where is your spiritual "Sodom?"

Perhaps the more important question is this: If God could make it so that a 100 year old woman could conceive a child, is it not possible that he could also work something wonderful and life-changing in your life?

Indeed it is possible, but sometimes it requires a little persistence. A bit of boldness. Perhaps even some audacity. This is hard for me, because I'm always aware of the danger of presumption. But Jesus says, "Ask, seek, knock." The verbs are present tense, and imply a continuing and ongoing process.

There are times, then, when it pays to be persistent in prayer. Not because God is deaf or needs us to "badger" Him into submission, but because in any healthy parent/child relationship, the children do not always get *what* they ask for *when* they ask for it.

It's not because the parent doesn't love the child. It's just that in many cases time, growth, and maturity are necessary before children are ready and prepared to receive that for which they ask. Sometimes we may ask God for something, but

we are not mature enough to handle the responsibility that would come with receiving the thing for which we ask.

Jesus says, “Ask, seek, knock.” Persevere in prayer. I think he does so for at least two reasons.

First, we need persistence in prayer because we need to learn to pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,” more than “*my will be done.*” We need to learn to see the world through God’s eyes, not our eyes. Like Abraham, we need to learn to pray for God’s grace to be at work in the lives of all people, not just those who we think especially deserve it.

Secondly, we need to persist in prayer because we cannot discern the whole of God’s truth and plan all at once. We’re not emotionally or intellectually capable of it. If the whole of God’s truth were dumped on us at once, we would drown in it. And so we need to learn the discipline of prayer, of continually seeking after God’s heart, of training ourselves to see like God sees, of pursuing God’s kingdom with *importunity*.

Underlying all of this, of course, is an important lesson about prayer. Prayer is not just stuffing petitions or requests into a bottle and “tossing the bottle” out on the waters, waiting for God to respond. Prayer is not some mere mechanical transaction.

Jesus does not just give “stuff” in response to prayer. The ultimate purpose

of prayer is that God wants to give us *Himself*. It's not about *things*; it's about *relationship*. Jesus says it like this: "If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

Ask. Seek. Knock. Not because God is deaf or needs to be badgered. But because in the asking and seeking and knocking we discover God at work in us, so that our asking and seeking and knocking become less about ourselves and more about others, less about ourselves and more about pleading the mercy of God for ourselves and this broken down, hurting world in which we live.

As you come to the table of the Lord this morning, I invite you to bring your spiritual "Sodom" with you. And as you come to meet the Lord here, remember that God wants to answer your prayer by giving you the *Holy Spirit*, not just the solution you seek.

So come with faith. Receive the grace he offers you. Then go forth from this place confident that nothing is too difficult for Him.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.