

Sermon
Proper 12, Year C
July 29, 2007
by the Rev. Norman Bray

“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” What a strange thing for a 1st century Jew to ask, because he already prayed 3 times every day, at least three times. So what was it about Jesus that prompted this request? Was it that the apostles were jealous of the disciples of John the Baptist because he had given them a special prayer? Maybe, but I think that it is much more likely that the apostles were intrigued by the way that Jesus used prayer. By the 1st century some prayers were already set. Morning, noon, evening, you said a prayer, but Jesus prays more in Luke than in any other gospel. He prays before significant points in the gospel, before the calling of the apostles, Peter's confession, and the transfiguration. He prays at his baptism, at Gethsemane, on the cross, and later at table with his disciples. Jesus prayed a lot, and so I think that it was quite natural for his followers to want to imitate him, to learn from him.

But the prayer that Jesus teaches is so different from what they are accustomed to. They were used to some set prayers and it is possible that you may be familiar with one:

**Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai ehad Baruch
sheim kevod malchuto leolam vaed!**

*Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One! Blessed is God's
glorious name, now and forever!*

That does not sound much like “Father, hallowed be your name.” to us but it really is very near. Blessed or sacred is your name. Just think, all this time you have been praying a Jewish prayer without knowing it, but it makes sense though, considering the source. What about the 2nd line “Your Kingdom come”, do you ever think about what we are saying there? We are asking God to bring about the Kingdom of God right now. Think about that. The lame shall walk, the dumb shall speak, the lion and the lamb will lie down together, Democrats and Republicans will both quit calling talk radio stations to hurl offensive remarks at each other. Moslem's, Hindus, Jews, and

Christians will stop killing each other and truly begin to love their neighbor as themselves. Are you really prepared for all of that? You better be, because that is what we ask God for every time that we pray this prayer. And the parable that follows the prayer tells us that we are to be shameless in our persistence with this prayer, shameless in our persistence. The Greek words used in this parable convey more than just ask or knock or seek. It is more like ask, and keep on asking, knock, and keep on knocking, seek, and keep on seeking, shameless in our persistence.

Today's Old Testament story fits right in with our shameless persistence theme, with Abraham asking God over and over for a reduction in the number of righteous people required to forestall the judgment that was due Sodom and Gomorrah. What if there were fifty righteous people, would you destroy the city if there were fifty righteous people among all those unrighteous? And God says, ok, if there are fifty righteous people I will withhold my judgment. How about 45 people? 40? 30? 20? How about for 10 righteous people, would you withhold your judgment if there are just 10 righteous people in those cities? And God says yes, for 10 righteous people I would withhold my judgment. I have always heard this story as Abraham working for a better deal. I was in the car business for 20 years, what do you expect? But that is not what is going on here, Abraham is shameless in his persistence but he is not bargaining, he is trying to find out if God is truly a kind and loving and forgiving God or is this a vengeful, destructive God? Abraham is shameless and because of his persistence he learns and we also learn that God would stay judgment for thousands because it would harm a few of the righteous. This opens up a whole new way of looking at what we are doing in this world. It means that our prayer is important, the way that we live our lives is important. It means that being a follower of Christ, a Christian, is important and not just important to each of us as individuals, but it is important to the whole world. God cares that there are people who are attempting to lead righteous lives, God cares that we are here right now worshipping together at this Eucharist on the Lord's Day. And God hears our prayers, whether we pray alone or together in common prayer and worship, God hears our prayers and God answers those prayers. We know this both from our own experience and from scripture, both the Old Testament and the New Testament proclaim that our God is a faithful God and in today's Gospel Jesus tries to show us that God hears our prayers and that God answers those prayers. He uses

examples that we can understand because they are human examples, human stories and the last line shows what weak examples they are. "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?" The very best example of a human parent, an earthly parent, is pitiful compared to the love that our heavenly Father has for us. I want to say here that you can change Heavenly Father to Heavenly Mother if you like, if that works better for you. Jesus is using the image of a parent as a metaphor for God because we cannot grasp the reality of God; it is much too much for us to understand so we use images to give us little glimpses of what God must be like. That is what all of the parables are about, that is what the Abraham story in today's reading is about, trying to give us an idea of what God is like.

So, what have we learned from today's readings? We have learned that God is a gracious, loving, and forgiving God. We have learned how to pray. We learned that forgiveness is a 2 way street, we cannot expect God's forgiveness if we ourselves are unable to forgive others. We have learned that we want the Kingdom of God to come so completely into this world that we pray for it every day. We recognize that what we have comes from God and we pray that God does not bring us to the time of trial, don't let us be tested by the powers and principalities of this world because we fear that we may fail. We have learned that we should be shameless in our persistence in prayer, telling God everyday, more than every day, several times every day, what we need, what we feel that we have to have, asking God's forgiveness and telling God what we fear.

Join me in praying this prayer that we have on pg. 364 in the Book of Common Prayer, on the right side:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
As we forgive those
Who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial,
And deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
And the glory are yours,
Now and for ever. Amen