

## LECTIONARY 17 [Proper 12] (C-RCL) – July 24, 2022

**Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13**  
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In 1535, Martin Luther wrote a treatise on prayer called, “A Simple Way to Pray.” This volume was written for his friend and barber, Peter Beskendorf. In “A Simple Way to Pray”, Luther goes through each petition of the Lord’s Prayer, with a suggested meditation for each. Luther states that we must always speak the Amen firmly, never doubting that God in God’s mercy will hear us. “Never think,” he says, “that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain.” [Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Vol. 43. Devotional Writings: II.* H. T. Lehmann, general ed.; Gustav K. Wiencke, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p 198] To Luther’s words, I add, “Let us also think about our neighbors of good faith of other religious traditions joining us in prayer.”

““Lord, teach us to pray . . .” [Luke 11:1c] – Not, “Lord, teach us *how* to pray,” but “Lord, teach us to pray.” – “Teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” Give us some way that we can identify ourselves with you as *your* disciples.

The Gospel of Luke portrays Jesus praying on various occasions throughout his ministry: after the baptism [3:21]; in deserted places after teaching and healing among crowds [5:16]; all night on the mountain before choosing the twelve apostles [6:12]; before asking the question that leads to Peter’s confession [9:18]; on the mountain before the transfiguration [9:28-29]; after the return of the 70 [10:21-22]; before teaching the disciples what we call the Lord’s Prayer [11:1]; at the Mount of Olives the night of the betrayal [22:41-44];

and from the cross [23:{34,}46]. Luke also includes several *parables* of prayer (not found in Matthew, Mark, or John).

I appreciate how commentator Robert Smith speaks about today's texts. He says:

All that praying is part of a long biblical tradition of bold trusting that we are not alone, that we are loved into existence by a transcendent personal Presence, that we are heard and beheld and treasured, that our petitions on our own behalf and on behalf of others are not shouted into an unfeeling void. Abraham's bargaining with God in Genesis 18 is a classic and unforgettable encouragement to speak from our hearts to the Heart of the universe. [Robert H. Smith, "Preaching Helps", *Currents in Theology and Mission*, June 1995, p 228]

As a child, I found something very appealing about today's story of Abraham. Six times Abraham approaches God on behalf of the (at least *potential*) righteous residents of Sodom. There is, therefore, an element of *persistence* on Abraham's part. But persistence alone is not the central issue. – Abraham does not simply repeat the same petition. Instead, each time he "ups the ante", he "drives a tighter bargain".

In a movement of courage and daring, Abraham approaches God and begins his bargaining. The first "suppose..." is not only the longest; it raises the questions wherein this exchange can even take place. God has just spoken of the charge to Abraham to do righteousness and justice. Now Abraham asks the crucial question: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" [Genesis 18:25, NRSV] If, in the punishment of the guilty, the innocent are punished, has justice been done? In the exchange that follows, Abraham is clear about who *he* is – a supplicant who is "but dust and ashes."

[Genesis 18:27, NRSV] Abraham is not engaged in a battle of wills or a struggle for supremacy. Instead, out of a sense of God's importance, he presses God *to be who God is*.

Notice that after the second through the sixth petitions, God's response is: "For the sake of 45 [or 40, or 30, or 20, or 10], I will not destroy it." But listen again to God's response after Abraham's *first* petition. God says, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." [Genesis 18:27, NRSV, emphasis added] Abraham asks God about *justice*; God is ready to respond with *mercy*.

What is the model for prayer offered by our First Reading? The model is: "[b]old speech grounded in God's holy sovereignty". [Gail R. O'Day, *Proclamation 4: Pentecost 2, Series C* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), p 7]

The boldness of this praying is also the mode of prayer suggested by Jesus in today's Gospel. The disciples are instructed to address God in a way that "implies an intimate relationship". [*The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993) p 1981] As was Abraham's, so is our speech grounded in God's sovereign holiness. We are bold to ask God to give us *each day* our daily bread. We are bold to ask God for what we need for *daily* physical sustenance and for our particular *daily* cross-bearing. We boldly ask for the forgiveness of our sins; we trust in God's ability and willingness to make whole the brokenness in our relationships with God and with each other in the community. It is this assurance of absolution and reconciliation that gives us heart to pray. Confident in God's forgiveness, we are free to envision a way of being in human relationships that has no need to keep score of who owes what to us. Confidently, we pray for guidance in how we live out our lives, asking that we not yield to temptation in times of trial.

The invitation to bold praying is found also in the *parable* that Jesus tells. Sometimes this parable is held up for us as a model of persistent praying. And not without reason. Verse 8 of our text reads: “I tell you, even though he [the friend awakened at midnight] 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.” [Luke 11:8, NRSV, emphasis added] The older Revised Standard Version read: “...because of his *importunity* he will rise and give him whatever he needs.” [Luke 11:8, RSV, emphasis added] Notice, however, that the friend only makes his request *once*. The Greek word translated either as “persistence” or “importunity” is ἀναίδεια. The *literal* translation of ἀναίδεια is “impudence” or “shamelessness”. One commentator I consulted assigns this shamelessness to the *friend who did the asking* and states:

What compels the sleeping friend to act, then, is not repeated asking, but the shamelessness of the very act of asking. The friend arises from his bed because of the shameless boldness of his friend’s petition, which trusts that even at the unconventional hour of midnight, he will be heard and answered. The man dares to hold his friend to who he is and what he has promised.

[Gail R. O’Day, *Proclamation 4: Pentecost 2, Series C* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), p 7]

But another interpretation is also possible: Verses 5 through 7 are one long sentence in the Greek (and in the Revised Standard Version) where it begins with the question “Which of you?”: “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him”; and he will answer from within, “Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you

anything”?” – if the expected answer to that question is, “Not I! I wouldn’t do such a thing!”, then, suggests another commentator, the word “shameless” would *not* be used to describe the friend who does the asking, who is seeking to live out the expectations of his culture – that of providing hospitality to travelers. Rather, “shamelessness” would refer to the *sleeping neighbor*, and would provide his motivation for granting his friend’s request. For:

The sleeping neighbor was also under those social expectations and grudgingly provided his three loaves rather than lose face. The point is not that God is as difficult to convince as the groggy neighbor! Rather, the disciples are reminded that God’s honor is also at stake when legitimate requests are made, and that because God is anxious to grant their requests, they can trust in an infinitely more gracious response.

[Mark A. Throntveit, *Proclamation 5: Pentecost 2, Series C* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p 10]

“So,” says Jesus, “Ask, ... search, ... knock....” [Luke 11:9] “It will be given you; ... you will find; ... the door will be opened for you.” [Luke 11:10] Pray boldly, *confident* that God will respond. //

If persistence in prayer were the model from today’s readings, we could likely find numerous instances of persistent petitioning by young children! But we might also have examples of their *bold* petitioning, confident that we will respond. In this regard, I would like to share with you a poem I wrote, describing an event from when my daughter was not quite 22 months old:

“Back!” you say.  
I turn to look at you.  
There you sit, in your car seat,  
with left arm extended  
and index finger pointing  
imperiously  
toward the house  
from which I’ve recently come.

Near me rests a plastic box  
whose contents you have –  
for now at least –  
rejected: pretzel sticks,  
animal crackers,  
arrowroot cookies, saltines –  
none will do.

“Back!” you say  
(or is it, *you command?*).  
“You want *Ritz* crackers?” I ask.  
“Yeah.”  
“You want me to go *back* into the house  
and get you *Ritz* crackers?”  
“Yeah.”

Briefly, I consider:  
Is this a case of my giving in  
to your manipulations  
or is it one of your grasping language  
well enough to ask  
for what you want?

Do I know how to give good gifts to you?  
 You ask for a certain cracker;  
 do I give you a stone instead?  
 Do I know what *I* want  
 so I may ask for it  
 with such assurance?

I'm late enough already –  
 but you're so funny –  
 and you're requesting something  
 I can give.

I go.

[I went back into the house ...]

© 1995 Imogene A. Stulken – (December 22, 1994, when Kerstin was not quite 22 months old) with reference to Matthew 7:7-12 and Luke 11:9-13

Jesus asks, “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for {bread, will give a stone; or 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?” [Luke 11:11 {including addition from “other ancient authorities”}, NRSV] And then Jesus adds: “[*H*ow much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask ...?” [Luke 11:13b, emphasis added] //

Instead of the petition “Your kingdom come”, a few ancient authorities read, “Your Holy Spirit come upon us and cleanse us.” [Note to Luke 11:2c, NRSV] The Holy Spirit – *this* is the gift that is promised to those who ask! // What does the Holy Spirit’s presence look like in *this* place? Do we as a congregation pray for this gift? Do we want the uncertainty of what is later described by Luke in the book of Acts as rushing wind and tongues of fire? Dare we ask that this potentially unsettling Spirit of God be unleashed among us? [See

LBW #387: “Spirit of God, Unleashed on Earth”, John W. Arthur] This is the Spirit of whom Paul speaks in his letter to the Romans: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” [Romans 8:26-27, NRSV] *Dare we pray boldly for this Spirit?*

Several years ago, Barbara Rossing led the opening worship at a clergy event I attended. [New England Lutheran Clergy Assn, October 18, 1993 – with Christa Klein: “Speaking the Truth in Love—Charting Course in the ELCA” and Roger Johnson: “The Church Confronts Questions of Human Sexuality”] (Barbara Rossing is the current professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, but she was the former chaplain at Harvard Divinity School and an occasional preacher here at UniLu.) When I think of bold praying, I am reminded of Barbara’s words. She mentioned that she, with other staff members at one congregation, had “prayed the church directory.” Expanding this model, she named some of the current distresses of the world situation and invited us to “pray the global directory”. Barbara then lifted up for us a phrase from the hymn, “Rise, Shine, You People!”: “Your songs and prayers against the darkness hurling.” [Ronald A. Klug, LBW #393/ELW #665:3b]

It may seem, however, that our bold praying on behalf of others doesn’t get results. It may seem as if we have hurled and hurled and *hurled* our prayers with no evidence of a response from the One who has promised to hear us. Our texts today don’t solve the problem of what to do when our prayers seem not to be answered. But perhaps we may find hints. Abraham prays for the protection of the righteous in Sodom – including his nephew Lot and his family. He also prays for the preservation of God’s good



name as one who will not destroy the righteous with the wicked. This prayer is answered differently from what Abraham may have expected: Sodom is destroyed, but Abraham's family members escape the city; and thus, God's good name as one who is just is protected.

Note the *intercessory* nature of Abraham's prayer: Abraham pleads with God on behalf of the righteous residents of Sodom. And note the *corporate* aspect of prayer in Luke's account: "Teach *us* to pray; ... Give *us*; ... forgive *us*; ... do not bring *us* ...."

Barbara Rossing once wrote:

Prayer is the life-breath of people of faith. Through the intercession of God's Spirit, even our deepest sighs and longings become prayers. Through our intercessions, we join a body of Christ that extends around the world.

[She continued:] I certainly don't understand *how* intercession works. But I slowly have learned from global Christians the importance of intercessory prayer.

[Barbara Rossing, "How I Pray: Global Christians Teach Us to Pray", *The Lutheran Standard*, October 24, 1986, p. 19]

We would need another sermon to address the question of "unanswered prayer" or if prayer works. In this regard I have found an article on prayer by Peter Marty to be helpful. He suggests eliminating the use of the word "answer" from our talk of prayer outcomes, noting that "prayer is conversation with God"; it is "engaging a relationship". The purpose of prayer, "is to enjoy God." He adds: "More than anything else, the greatest delight in prayer is the way it affects and changes the one praying, not the way it alters the mind of God. It's the pray-er who gets reshaped. When

we put ourselves at the disposal of God ... we find ourselves being changed in ways we never could have imagined." Peter Marty concludes: "God knows and sees more urgent needs than any of the ones that occur to us. Instead, treat prayer as an opportunity to be foisted into the great big world of God's affection . . . and to be personally changed in the process. It's wonderful." [Peter W. Marty, "Challenging conversations: Talking about prayer", *The Lutheran*, June 2013, p. 3]

Let us pray.

Living God, you raise us to fullness of being  
in sharing the Christ-life together.

Teach us to pray  
and grant us hopeful persistence  
in seeking your will and your way ...

Make us bold in asking,  
thankful in receiving,

tireless in seeking,  
and joyful in finding, ...

that by the power of the Spirit,  
love and faithfulness may meet  
to disarm the powers of the world. Amen.

[The Consultation on Common Texts, *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), YEAR C, sections of Series 1 & Series 2 combined, pp. 166-167]