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Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-13

Today's vignette from Genesis depicts Abraham at his most active, doing everything he can to prevent God from destroying the city of Sodom. God must have been thoroughly entertained as Abraham practiced his prayer of bargaining for the collective. Acting like an auctioneer in reverse, Abraham sang God's praises while he kept lowering the price required to save the city.

While many people take the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as proof of God's ire and readiness to punish sexual immorality, there is something much deeper at stake. We have all seen evidence that suggests one bad apple can spoil the bunch. In this story, Abraham asks God if a minority of good people can save the rest. Would God spare the city if there were 50 good people there ... or 40 ... or even just 10?

Jesus offers a complement to the scene with Abraham when he talks about prayer. First, Jesus teaches his disciples how he himself prays. He gives us a number of phrases that work together to sum up Christian life and mission. Beginning with the instruction to call upon the almighty Creator as "Father," the next petition actually commits us to do all in our power to bring God's kingdom to fruition in our time and place. We ask God to provide all we need, the bread of each day and the sustenance of a world in which forgiveness reigns over selfishness and revenge. Finally, like Jesus himself, we ask that we not be put to the final test, but that the cup of suffering pass us by — if that be God's will.

That's the prayer. Jesus then adds some illustrations about what it means in action. He weaves a parable about three people: One is seeking food, one is so poor that she or he has nothing to share, and the third wants to sleep through the entire drama. The poor person in the middle is a bit like Abraham — pleading with someone who has power to help a person in need. Abraham kept bargaining God down; the agitator in this parable won't let the affluent person sleep in peace until the hungry are fed.

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Jesus' next teaching on prayer reworks what we hear in Matthew 7:7-11 and 18:19— ask and you will receive. Jesus seems to promise that whatever Christians ask will be granted. Luke quotes those same promises as a commentary on the prayer Jesus has taught and the parable of the hungry, the seeker and the sleeper. Jesus' teaching encourages the seeker to keep knocking until the sleeper gives in and opens the cupboard for the hungry one.

As a commentary on the invitation to call on God as a father, Jesus referred to their own experience of parenthood. He didn't say, "You give the kids everything they ask for," but in effect, "Who among you would trick a child by giving her something that could kill her when she asked for food?" We can just imagine how some in the audience cringed when he threw out the idea of sneaking a snake into the hand of a child. Not even a mean big brother would let a little kid near a scorpion.



(Mark Bartholomew)

Jesus used those examples to refocus their imaginations from a fixation on what they wanted to a consideration of how a loving parent responds to children in need. Those illustrations were preparation for the clincher: "How much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?" (*italics added*).

Jesus tried to teach that prayer is an expression of a relationship between unequals. When as disciples of Jesus we call on God as Father, we stand in the center of an enigma: We are invited into trusting intimacy with the eternal Creator of the universe, whose name is so sacred that we cannot even pronounce it. That realization alone is enough to move us to the awe that proclaims, "Hallowed be your name!" Those two phrases set up the rest of the prayer to express our relationship with God as one of grateful dependence and committed obedience.

By sharing this style of praying, Jesus invites us to participate in his kind of relationship with the Father. When it comes to praying on behalf of others, the teaching about the seeker who knocked the sleeper out of bed teaches that when we pray for the needs of others, we oblige ourselves to do our part to respond, if only by disturbing those who have but do not share. In terms of our own needs, Jesus tells us to ask for whatever we want and that God will give us the Spirit, which is all we need. Most of all, the gist of Jesus' teaching about prayer — and about everything else — is that God wants to give us what will give us life.

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