

“Teach us to pray”

For the past several weeks I have been writing about prayer in the weekly blog posts. One aspect of prayer that I have tried to convey is that it is a conversation. It is a dialogue not a monologue. We speak to God but we leave time and silence for God to respond.

I expect that many, if not all of us, have bargained with God. It usually goes something like, “God if you get me out of this mess I promise to {insert farfetched promise here}.” If everything works out to our benefit we are likely to keep our side of the bargain for a while until we tire of the burden. If things don’t work out as we want we are likely to get mad at God for not doing our bidding.

In today’s reading from Genesis Abraham bargains in a different way. As the three visitors/angels (whom we encountered in last week’s reading) are leaving his campsite and heading toward Sodom he asks the last angel where he is headed. (The last of the three angels is revealed to us to be the Lord God, and Abraham treats the angel as such.) The Lord tells Abraham he is on his way to check out the rumors he has heard about Sodom. He has heard of their wickedness and he wants to see for himself. This characterization of God is not the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God of later theology, but it sets up a great conversation between God and Abraham.

Abraham shows great concern for the innocent in Sodom. He is afraid that God in his wrath will destroy the town if their wickedness is pervasive. Despite being face to face with the Almighty, Abraham has the chutzpah to start bargaining with God. I love how Abraham does it. Through a combination of guilt and flattery he goads God into saying he will not wipe out the city for the sake of fifty righteous people. Then he works God down to forty-five, forty, thirty and twenty. Each time God assents. The bargaining stops at ten¹ with God going on his way as Abraham watches.

This seems like a rather clever way to deal with God. In fact, it is used throughout the Old Testament. The psalms are rife with prayers that flatter God and remind God that the petitioner is true and faithful, and no one will be left to praise God if the petitioner goes down to the dust. While it is a dialogue and it worked for Abraham, this is not a prayer style I advocate.

In the Gospel reading we hear another way of praying that is advocated by Jesus. It is interesting that his disciples goad Jesus into teaching them how to pray by bringing up John the Baptist. As I hear them speaking I think of a group of kids pushing their coach, teacher or parent to let them do something because the other kids get to do it. It is the type of plea that usually ends up with the adult saying, “If Jimmy’s parents let him jump off of a cliff would you go, too?”

¹ Ten is the minimum number of people required to a Jewish prayer service. A group of ten is known as a minyan.

Of course, Jesus is much more patient and he responds as if he had been waiting for this question all along by giving them what we call the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father or the Pater Noster (which is Latin for Our Father). In Luke the prayer is different from the more familiar version from Matthew. While it is a little shorter, the gist is the same.

This way of praying is very different from Abraham or the psalms. There is no manipulation, no bargaining, and no flattery. There is humility and a blunt acknowledgment that we forgive those indebted to us. This prayer is a prayer for all time, because it is not specific to any singular situation. It allows that we can add particular petitions and thanksgivings because there is no firm end. It is a prayer that is full in its simplicity.

I expect the disciples might have wanted something fancier. They might have wanted a set of words that only they would know. Those words would be like the secret handshake of a fraternity or sorority, or the password to get into a club.

Jesus reveals that there are no special words. The key is to approach God in humility, thanks, respect, and awe. Do not be fearful but do not wheedle. Pray in sincerity. God is not to be bargained with. God is not interested in flattery. What God wants as "broken and contrite heart."²

Then wait for a response. Don't jump up and be on your way having done the minimum. Wait to give your "amen" after you have given God time to respond. You may not hear a response in the moment or realize that you heard it, but give God time. Then as you go on your way through the day be open to the revelation of God's response. Give thanks for what you hear or see in response to your prayer for it is truly a gift from God. If it is not what you expected, then allow yourself to wonder as God's intention is revealed to you in the days to come.

Let us say it together:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.

² Psalm 51:17