

Genesis 18:20-32 Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

²² The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. ²³ Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ²⁶ The Lord said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." ²⁷ Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." ²⁹ Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." ³⁰ Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." ³¹ Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it." ³² Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

Lord, teach us to pray

1. Pray humbly
2. Pray boldly
3. Pray with love for souls

What's one of the first things you learned how to do as a baby? Besides the things that come naturally like eating, burping, and crying. One of the first things you learned to do was roll over. Once you perfected that, you learned to lift yourself up on your hands and knees, then crawl and then walk. Now, you probably roll over in bed without even thinking about it. We do that naturally.

Jesus was a natural at prayer. The scene in the gospel lesson this morning is one that is repeated often in the gospels: "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place." (Luke 11:1) Prayer came as naturally to Jesus as rolling over. His disciples, however, felt like newborn babes when it came to prayer, so they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1) That is what we are here to learn this morning. Prayer is something that should come as naturally as rolling over to a Christian, but maybe not. We sometimes define prayer as "speaking to God from the heart." Seems so easy. What does not come naturally, however, is the focused prayer God wants for us. Yes, we can speak from the heart and ask for anything we want. But our Father invites us to pray specifically for the things he wants to give us.

So today we are going to learn about prayer by listening in on Abraham as he talks to God. As we listen today, may our silent prayer be, "Lord, teach us to pray."

The first thing we learn from Abraham is to pray humbly. Did you hear what he called himself? *Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes.* He was made from dust and would return to dust. What was Abraham compared to God? Nothing. Dust and ashes. He didn't approach God because he was worth it. He didn't say, "I deserve an answer from you, God." He came humbly as dust and ashes before the holy God.

"Like Abraham we need to realize that we are beggars. Only when Jesus goes with me, dare I knock on the Father's door in heaven. When he opens, Jesus will tell him, 'Father, answer, not because of him the sinner, but me the Savior.'" (Richard Lauersdorf, The Northwestern Lutheran, August 1985) We heard it from Paul earlier: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all people." (1 Timothy 2:5-6) Jesus became our mediator through blood and death, through suffering and the cross. He is our mediator who stands between us and God's justice. He is our mediator now who clears the way for our prayers to the Father. "With Jesus I can go boldly to the Father who stands there waiting for me to speak just as with Abraham that day." (Lauersdorf)

Perhaps we need to be reminded that prayer is a privilege, an audience with the King that we don't deserve. The only thing we deserve from God is the same kind of punishment that Sodom and Gomorrah experienced. But washed clean in Jesus, God now invites us to his throne and he promises to listen to us. Seeing that prayer is a privilege of faith,

we will approach the throne of God with humility. "Knowing him and myself, my prayers will not be demands. They will not be crowbars I use to pry something loose from God, but wheelbarrows to cart my loads to him. He knows better than me how to handle my affairs and answer my needs." (Lauersdorf)

Did you ever hear a little boy come into the house and tell his mother, "I'm going to help daddy fix the car?" He is filled with pride because dad asked him to help. He hands dad a wrench or a screwdriver now and then and in his mind he is helping. Dad could do the job easier and faster without the boy there but he loves to have his son help him and the son loves it, too. That's what prayer does.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about this account is that God listened to Abraham's prayer and agreed not to destroy the cities if he could find 50 believers in them. That teaches us something important about prayer. It teaches us that God doesn't command us to pray just because it inflates his ego to have millions of people crying out to him. He invites us to pray because he promises to hear and listen to our prayers. He let's himself be overcome by the prayers of his people and takes what we have to say into consideration in the way that he rules the world.

So, pray boldly and persistently. That was Jesus' point in the gospel lesson. He tells of a man going to his neighbor in the night asking for bread. Jesus said the man will get up and give him what he asks for, not because he cares about him, but because of the man's persistence. He uses a word that is sometimes translated "shameless persistence."

Did your children ever come up and say, "Mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy"? That's what Jesus is talking about. When Martin Luther's puppy happened to be at the table, he looked for a morsel from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes. Luther said, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise, he has no thought, wish or hope."

That kind of single-minded persistence is the model Jesus gave in the gospel lesson and the example Abraham gives us today. "Too often we pray like mischievous children ringing someone's doorbell and running away before they can answer." (Lauersdorf) Persistent prayer will keep ringing the doorbell of God's heart until he answers.

How many times do you pray about something? Is that persistence? Why do so many people think that God doesn't answer prayer? They pray once and give up. Prayer is an exercise of faith. If we really believe that God wants to answer prayer and that he will answer prayer and if what I am asking for is important, why would I give up? If your child asked once for a cookie and then never asked again, you would conclude that he wasn't that hungry. Maybe the Father is concluding the same thing about our prayers. Pray with shameless persistence.

The last lesson we learn from Abraham about prayer is also, I think, the most important. Pray with love for souls. Abraham lived near a threatening and hostile community. The citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah did not respect other people's property, privacy or lives. We might have been supportive of Abraham if he would have responded to the Lord's announced judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in this way: "Great, Lord! Let them have it."

But what did Abraham ask? *Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it."*³² *Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."* He prayed with a love for souls and for God's honor.

Isn't that what Paul was urging in the lesson from 1 Timothy today? He urged us to pray for all people, for kings and others in authority. Let us pray with a love for souls.

What were our prayers like this last week? Was it, "they" and "them" or was it "I" and "mine"? How quickly my needs can bend my knees in prayer and those prayers take up the little time we give to speaking with God.

What is our attitude about the people living in our community? Do we view our neighbors through the eyes of fear and mistrust? Are we just being careful and responsible? Or are we being judgmental and prejudiced? Abraham illustrated what it is to look through the eyes of a loving Messiah. Abraham cared about the people in his community. He didn't want to take careless risks for the sake of even a few who believed in the Lord. Perhaps Abraham was thinking of those who might one day come to believe in the Lord.

Pray with love for souls. Jesus did that for you. Nailed to a cross, his thoughts didn't turn inward and selfish. He had a heart for others and he prayed with love for souls when he said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) He prayed for forgiveness for those who put him on the cross with their nails, their orders, their shouts, their sin. He prayed for us. Then he died for us so that we could have life, heaven and every spiritual blessing. He prayed with love for our souls. May we pray humbly, boldly and persistently, and may we pray with love for other's souls.