

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 28 2019

Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

The earliest prayers I remember praying were bedtime prayers with my mother.

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I die before I wake. I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless, Momma, and Dadda, and Kathy and Grandma and Grandpa, and Nana and Papa, and my friend Bryant. Amen.

Then there were the mealtime prayers we prayed.

Come Lord Jesus be our guest and let these gifts to us be blest. Amen.

I learned about praying at the feet of my mother. We watched religious programming on TV when I was little, the PTL Club and other programs where they were always praying out loud, often very emotionally. I saw my mother in personal prayer at all times and places. With people and alone. It was from watching her and my father, from going to worship and children's education at our church, St. Mark's Lutheran in Charlotte, NC and listening and participating in the prayers there from the time I could fold my hands and bow my head, that I learned something about HOW you pray.

To my young mind, it was remarkably like talking to someone you knew, maybe a parent or other adult. Someone with some power and authority, who you respected, maybe were a little bit frightened of, but who was also kindly and approachable.

The how was pretty straightforward. You said their name, to get their attention, so they knew that you were talking to them and not someone else. You told them

what you wanted to convey or ask them. Could you help my sister feel better, my friend to be comforted because her sister died, keep my family safe, helping the starving children in the world? Then you might put in something for yourself. Then you said thanks and goodbye.

While I learned a lot about prayer and how to do it from my mother and my early and often experiences in my childhood, the reality is that what I learned most through that experience was who God was. God was someone my mother went to when she was troubled or hurting. Wow! To my young mind, God must be pretty important and powerful for Mom to turn to for help. God would listen, to anything you say or ask. At the very least, God would make you feel better, even if the thing bothering you didn't magically go away; like mom kissing a scraped knee. God might even respond to your prayer in a way that you could not imagine!

The text we have today really is a mix of at least four different vignettes. They can be somewhat confusing or challenging to read. But I wonder if the most important thing in all of them, what ties them together, is what they teach us about who God is. For more than anything, prayer is about being in relationship with God. Being invited into a personal communion with the divine. As writer Anne Lamott puts it, "Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence ...". Prayer is that intimate connection and conversation with the divine, with all the intimacy and exchange that happens in any honest conversation.

So, what is the character of this God to whom we pray? Is God like a divine Santa Claus dispensing gifts to those who are good? Is God a stickler for the rules, only

answering prayers that are prayed in the right way by the right people? Is God like the fickle ruler, granting petitions or dispensing pain based on God's whims?

The disciples, like me with my mother when I was young, have watched Jesus' prayer life over time and especially in the Gospel of Luke it is very active. Jesus is connected with prayer at least nine times in Luke, more than any other synoptic gospel. The disciples have seen Jesus pray before and after big events. Taking time from his busy schedule to go apart somewhere and pray. They have seen how this has helped Jesus in his ministry. They have heard Jesus talk about God as his Abba- Father or daddy.

Now, this last bit might have made them really curious. In the Greco-Roman world of that time, a Father was lord of the family and that might not always work out so well for me as child of this father. The father would decide everything you could do or be from your birth until the death of one of you. Whether you would be raised in the family or apart, whether you would be exposed to die, married off for land or power, what work you would do, whether you would be educated or not. Even into your adulthood, your father would be the final decider about your life; where you lived, what deals you made, who you associated with. Often regardless of your thoughts or feelings. So, this obviously colored how people understood this term. Father was a figure of authority, almost authoritarian in power and influence in your life. One who told you what to do.

The disciples ask Jesus to teach them something of what he knows about praying. Their question shows that they are wanting something that makes them unique, distinctive. Like the way John the Baptist's disciples pray. Think of what they are

asking for like the unique chant you get from fans of a football or soccer team. They want something to make them stand out.

While what Jesus does teach them lays the foundation for our Lord's Prayer, what is most important is that the picture Jesus draws of God is a much more intimate one than had existed before. It also clarifies what Jesus means when he calls God, Abba- Father.

What we see in these texts is a God who is indeed holy, sacred, who provides the basics we need every day to live, who forgives, who protects. Jesus makes the point that even the harsh Father figure of popular imagination won't give their child a snake instead of a fish or a scorpion instead of an egg. And if this is so, how much more then will Jesus' Father give only good things when we ask. Including the best thing you can receive, the Holy Spirit.

We see in this portrait an image of God as one who wants to be in relationship. to share our dreams, hopes, and fears. Who invites and desires for folks to Ask, Seek, Knock. To approach God again and again and again. This is a God who has an open door policy, twenty-four/seven. Who wants to hear from us.

And most importantly, Jesus encourages his disciples to pray calling God- Abba, Father. And now we know that this image of father is nothing like the popular imagination. This is a Father who desires to hear from us. Who desires to give us only good things. Who responds to our requests and needs. We know that this God loves us. And desires to be intimately connected with us as well. Enough to invite us to invoke that familial relationship.

Through prayer (personal and together), we encounter a God who is always available, who always listens, who always provides us enough for the next day, who always gives us good gifts.

There are parts of this text that can be difficult. We can read the section inviting us to ask, search, and knock as one that promises we will get whatever we ask for. Those who preach the Prosperity Gospel believe this; Just ask God for good things, believe it is so, and it will happen. Yet, each of us, I'm sure, has occasion to know this is not true. We have asked for things, even good things - for others, that have not happened. We could, sometimes reasonably, explain why this is so. I've even done this myself.

But I wonder if the better thing is to let God defend Godself and return to the point of the text. To what we know from the witness of scripture and Jesus, God's own Son. That God is the one whom you can keep coming back to, time and again, and God will listen to you. God is the one who you can hold to account for who God is. This is what Abraham is doing in the first reading, "Far be it from you to slay the righteous with the wicked!" That's not who you are God! You are gracious and merciful. Look at the Psalms. Time and again these prayers (for that is what these songs are/ prayers of the authors) call God to account for who God is. To say, "Hey God, this is who you said you were...well get to being that!" "You said you protect your people, well...I need some protecting!"

What does it say about our God that we can speak this way to God and still God promises to listen, to hear, to act, to be faithful to us? What does it say that our God is one who will wrestle with us, as Jacob does by the river? What does it say that our God listens and responds to Job's complaint?

What would it be like to pray to God with this image in your head?

How would it shape how you pray? How would it shape how often you pray?

Prayer is a simple and powerful thing. Perhaps one of the best faith practices we can participate in. One that we can do at any time or any place. One that as parents and adults of faith we model for our children. One that shapes us and brings us into a better understanding of who God is.

I pray that each of you would experience that kind of communion with God in prayer on a regular basis. I pray that you would know the joy and comfort of calling God Abba- and having your own mental and emotional picture of what that means. I pray, that we would all be shaped by that prayer more and more into the image of our Lord, Jesus. I pray.....

Amen.