

Hello, and this is the Holy Nemesis podcast for Sunday, July 28. I am Mark Lingle, rector of St. Francis Episcopal Church in Stamford, Connecticut.

The text assigned for Pentecost 7C is from Luke 11.1-13. The text reads:

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

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."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he 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.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, 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? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

The text is, perhaps, one of the best known portions of scripture. We recite the Lord's Prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples every Sunday. What may surprise you in hearing Luke's rendition of the prayer is recognizing that it is a pithy version of what we actually pray today. Nevertheless, the main elements are there. God's name is confessed holy. The in-breaking of the kingdom is alluded to. Daily bread is requested. We ask for forgiveness while we also seek to forgive. And we pray for protection from trials and tribulations.

There is a wonderful reflection on this prayer by Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (d. 258) that captures well an important aspect of this and the many prayers that we pray. Cyprian writes:

Before all things the Teacher of peace and Master of unity is unwilling for prayer to be made single and individually, teaching that he who prays is not to pray for himself alone. For we do not say, "My Father who art in heaven," nor "Give me this

day my bread”.... Prayer with us is public and common; and when we pray we do not pray for one but for the whole people because we the whole people are one.

While this communal reality to prayer is important for us to remember, perhaps the larger question raised by the disciples’ immediate question, “Lord, teach us to pray,” is what, exactly, is prayer. Is it wishful thinking? Is it self-fulfilling prophecy? Is it our last best hope as we stare into the abyss? And how do we understand what, if anything, is the result of prayer--or is to be the result of prayer? While this certainly does not answer these questions, it is a good place to begin and leads us into the rest of the gospel narrative for this week. The quote comes from Howard Thurman who notes, “When Jesus prayed, he was conscious that, in his prayer, he met the Presence, and this consciousness was far more important and significant than the answering of his prayer.” If nothing else, prayer places us proximate to the Presence.

Meanwhile, the parables that Jesus offers his disciples--and to us--after giving his template for prayer offers a good deal for us to continue to consider when thinking about prayer.

To begin with, the elephant in the room for most of us is exactly what *do* we think is going on in prayer. Is prayer like the friend who bothers you in the middle of the night for a loaf of bread? Is our praying simply a way to get what we need? While ancient and modern hucksters have hawked their wares and duped many down through the ages with promises of getting all you desire if you simply pray in the right way, the hope remains that we might be a bit skeptical of this utilitarian and obnoxious understanding of prayer.

Furthermore, what does the parable say about the God whom we pray to if God is depicted as the lukewarm friend who finds it troubling to help you out in the middle of the night? Is not God supposed to know our needs and provide? How do we square the understanding of God’s omniscience with this specific scenario? What about God’s compassion and response to need? Clearly, the allegorical reading of Jesus’ parable does not provide much in the way of solace or sustenance. Perhaps one of the ways to enter into the parables is through the lens of the story that is told in our first reading for this Sunday from Genesis. The story is the classic tale of God revealing to Abraham that God is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, what then transpires is Abraham interceding on behalf of the cities and bargaining God down from saving the city if there are fifty righteous individuals to saving the city if there are ten righteous.

The story surely does not answer all our questions regarding prayer. However, it palpably expresses the deep passion and engagement that God has with God’s creatures in prayer. One might even say that Abraham gets God to change God’s mind. No small task, yet, certainly an aspect of God that is repeated in the Hebrew Scripture, and a wonderful idea to reflect on.

One of the keys to reading the parable that Jesus offers centers around the interpretation of the Greek word *anaideia*. The Greek word is not common, used only here and in Sirach 25:22 within the

Greek Bible. The word does not actually mean “persistence,” but, rather, it more rightly connotes “shamelessness.” The man is shameless in bothering his neighbor in the wee hours of the night. While the neighbor may initially hesitate to respond, ultimately his response to the man bothering him brings honor to them both. And when we think about all the concerns and cares and desires and longings that we bring forward in prayer, are not just a few of them of this shameless variety?

While we may not well know what to always pray for, the end of Jesus’ teaching on prayer in this portion from Luke reminds us that for each of us as we are asking, searching, and knocking our way through life to understand our meaning and our purpose, there is a larger reality that does not coddle us when we pray aright or punish us when we fall short of our prayer. Rather, the engagement with the divine as a holy struggle with a holy nemesis--akin to Abraham--is a form of our praying. Ultimately, the answer that we seek in prayer may not so much be a specific outcome as it may be the journey itself.