

Seventh Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): **“ASK!”**  
Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11: 1-13  
July 27-28, 2019  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Who has taught you how to pray? (Not that any of us think we’re experts at it...)

The disciples **often** saw Jesus praying – or heading out to pray – so although they were good Jews who certainly had been taught to pray, they wanted to learn more. They realized they weren’t experts either and they’d noticed that their rabbi, Jesus, seemed to pray effortlessly and was drawn to prayer like a bee to honey.

*“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”*  
(Luke 11:1c)

I’m guessing Jesus’ answer to them is the best-loved of all Christian prayers: the Lord’s Prayer (or, as some call it, the Our Father).... If you want a mini-sermon on that, look up Luther’s explanation of the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism. (It’s in the back of our Evangelical Worship Book, after the hymns.)

My favorite part of today’s Gospel actually comes later, after the parable of the friend who arrives at midnight. It’s the best, most memorable acronym in the Bible: ASK:

A, S, K:

- A stands for Ask;
- S stands for Seek;
- K stands for Knock.
  - *“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.” (Luke 11:9-10)*

Usually not on the first bounce, though. You know how people have different styles knocking on someone’s door? Are you a bold or a timid knocker? Are you a “Boom! Boom! Boom!” or a “tap, tap, tap”? Or a “Shave and a haircut, two bits”? I never want to sound imperious and demanding, so I’m apt to knock so gently that if no one answers the door right away I end up wondering if someone **is** home, but didn’t hear me.

This parable, this earthly story with a heavenly meaning, is a lot like the one about the “importunate” widow, the persistent petitioner, the “I’m not going to take no for an answer!” gal (Luke 18:1-8). We should be **bold** in prayer. We should **keep coming to the plate** no matter how many times we seem to strike out. We should have **holy chutzpah**, like Abraham in our memorable 1<sup>st</sup> lesson from Genesis.

The backstory is that the Lord has heard an “outcry” rising to heaven against Sodom. The Lord is going to check out the accusations for himself, but Abraham is pretty sure that there’s good basis for the outcry and Sodom is “going down.” Sodom is often associated with sexual sin, but according to the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 16:49; see also Jeremiah 23:14) the more glaring faults of that city’s occupants were lack of hospitality to the stranger and lack of concern for the poor, mired and consumed as they were in their own luxuries and excesses. (You may notice some similarities between that city’s callousness and current events.)

In any case, Abraham goes to bat for these folks whom he barely knows, other than his nephew Lot and his family. He wasn’t afraid that his arm was too short to box with God! Here’s the paraphrase from *The Message* of what Abraham has to say to the Lord, maybe with his feet planted shoulder’s width apart, hands on his hips:

*“Are you serious? Are you planning on getting rid of the good people right along with the bad? What if there are fifty decent people left in the city; will you lump the good with the bad and get rid of the lot? Wouldn't you spare the city for the sake of those fifty innocents? I can't believe you'd do that, kill off the good and the bad alike as if there were no difference between them. Doesn't the Judge of all the Earth judge with justice?”* (Genesis 18:23-25)

Whoa. A lot of people wouldn't give God lip like that, afraid they'd be smited! I wonder if Abraham held his breath, waiting for God's reaction -- which was:

*“If I find fifty decent people in the city of Sodom, I'll spare the place just for them.”*  
(Genesis 18:26, *The Message*)

Abraham didn't simply thank his lucky stars (along with thanking God), accept that victory and call it a day. He continued to press, to knock not just loudly but bang with a gavel! “Will you forgive for the sake of:

- 45?
- 40?
- 30?
- 20?
- 10?”

‘Sure looks like God changed God's mind, doesn't it? ‘Sure looks like God's heart and mind were open to Abraham's argument. Abraham's wholehearted intercession made a difference. Later in time Moses would take a page from Abraham's book and go to bat for the children of Israel to prevent God from incinerating them, after discovering that while Moses was on Mt. Horeb receiving the 10 commandments they were below in base camp melting down their jewelry, casting a golden calf, worshiping and cavorting around it.

*Moses tried to calm his God down. He said, “Why, God, would you lose your temper with your people? Why, you brought them out of Egypt in a tremendous demonstration of power and strength. Why let the Egyptians say, ‘He had it in for them—he brought them out so he could kill them in the mountains, wipe them right off the face of the Earth.’ Stop your anger. Think twice about bringing evil against your people!...” And God did think twice. He decided not to do the evil he had threatened against his people.* (Exodus 32:11-14, *The Message*)

- Ask.
- Search.
- Knock.

In the New Testament Letter of James we read:

*Are you hurting? Pray... Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet... [P]ray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with. (James 5:13-16, The Message)*

One of the lasting lessons in prayer my Grandma and Dad gave me was persistence, not just in terms of **not giving up in the short term** until a prayer is answered as we hope, but **not giving up in the long term**, when we are disappointed, dis-**heartened**, dis-**couraged**, because the answer to our prayer for a loved one's recovery from illness wasn't the physical healing we beseeched God to give, but their physical death, their release from suffering and passage from earthly to everlasting life.

It's a very real temptation, to take our marbles and go home when we don't get the answer to prayer we were hoping and praying for. But that's exactly the time when we have to keep showing up, with holy chutzpah, with deep trust that our God hears and cares and saves, despite what we might take to be evidence to the contrary.

In the TV series *Call the Midwife* there's a lovable character named Sr. Monica Joan. She suffers from a bit of dementia but frequently shares the greatest wisdom in the show. A young sister confesses her difficulty in prayer to Sister Monica Joan, who responds: "You will not be getting better at it, but you will become patient and that will be the true grace." Patience, persistence, boldness, high expectations, faithfulness in prayer: may these be the lessons we learn and pass on in love, lessons that will outlive us and glorify God far beyond our short pilgrimages on this earth. Amen

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