

[Readings: Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-3]

Hearing the familiar story of Abraham “bartering” with God reminds me of those pawn shop reality series now flooding cable TV. A customer comes in with what he or she determines is an item of value. The pawn shop owner gives his assessment of the item, calling in an expert to make sure his instincts are correct. Then they haggle over the price. “I positively absolutely cannot give you more than this.” “I absolutely, positively cannot take less than that.” Usually, the pawn shop owner lowers his offer, and the owner of the item of value takes it.

The importance of today’s reading isn’t about the haggling. Although it seems there wasn’t even five righteous people there. It’s about justice. Should just people die in a fiery blaze because of the sins of others? And what WAS that sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? Sodom and Gomorrah were cities of notorious sin. They did not offer hospitality to the stranger. They abused their sexuality, and, at the same time, they worshiped other gods. They did not trust fully in God’s power. God seeks to destroy this nation and unleash the divine justice they so rightly deserve. One Scripture scholar suggests that the real sin here is people pointing out the sins of others and overlooking their own. Look at Abraham himself. He was the first Jewish patriarch, venerated by the three major world religions – Jewish, Christian and Muslim. But he had multiple wives, committed adultery and often lied to cover his tracks. Perhaps this First Reading should make us aware that each one of us comes before God as a sinner. While God would have every right to condemn us with His divine justice, God offers mercy to the repentant. This reading invites us to focus on our own sin, on our own developing sense of compassion, and the offer of mercy by God to all the waiting world.

In a conversation with God, Abraham explores the range of God’s mercy. When have you been surprised by the extent that God extends mercy to you, choosing to forgive you and welcoming you back to the fold?

Jesus not only shows us how to pray, He encourages persistence. Can you think of a time when your own persistence in prayer has yielded benefits? What keeps you from being persistent in asking for what you truly need?

A young man on a retreat once told this story of prayer: "I was so angry at God because I had asked and asked him to help me stop doing drugs. And then before long I was getting high again.

"I was angry at God and I was angry at my parents who told me that God would help me if I asked. And I was angry at my Catholic school teachers who taught me the same thing. I was especially angry one Sunday when I went back to church after a long time and the preacher said that we should be persistent in prayer and not give up. But I wanted to give up. I could no longer trust God after being seemingly turned down, or worse, ignored, so many times before. And yet a few days later, after another terrible night acting in ways that left me shamed and empty and aching, I got down on my knees one more time. I uttered just two words: 'God, help!' He continued:

"And I felt something. It was an inner click of willingness. Something inside shifted, and trust was born inside me. It only took that moment, and my recovery began. And now I'm glad for every prayer I said along the way. It took all that praying not to change God, but to change me."

This doesn't mean that every trouble or sorrow will be erased by God. After all, the One Who taught us the Our Father knew the fullness of suffering on the cross. He took upon Himself everything that men and women could throw at Him. And yet, He trusted amid this sorrow that the Father would act. The Father would act because God never forgets the righteous!

All of us run the risk of being frozen in our present lives by our past sinful actions. Even when we get the chance to start over, the memory of those actions and the personality they expose stop us in our tracks. And we become dead again.

I heard a homily years ago about the expression "forgive and forget." We have heard and maybe said that expression before, right? "Forgive and forget." I remember a priest saying one time that if we do not forget, we have not truly

forgiven. I do not agree with that opinion. Now that I am on medication and am reaching that age when forgetting is becoming quite regular, here is what I believe is the true difference between the two.

Forgetting is the cessation of memory, the stopping of remembering. But it may also mean the cessation or the stopping of affection. The offense has been so great, my heart becomes cold and stony toward you or toward myself.

Forgiving is the healing of memories. They are still there, but they will no longer have power or control over me. Forgiving can renew affection. The relationship may be different from this point on, but I permit myself to feel for you or for myself once again. Finally, forgiving keeps something in mind that I need to remember but to keep it in its proper place.

So it is possible to forgive and remember, but also possible to move on.

Luke's Gospel has a different wording of the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, than Matthew has in his version. Matthew's version says, "Forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us." Luke says – did you notice it here? – "forgive us our sins FOR WE OURSELVES forgive everyone in debt to us." Jesus teaches us in both versions that there is a connection between the way we forgive ourselves and others and the way God forgives us.

Luke seems to believe that God first forgives us; then, because of God's generosity, we're prompted to forgive ourselves and others. The difference here it seems is that God, who cannot be outdone in mercy, can forgive even if we do not. It might be good for us to ask what prompts God to be so generous to us. There can be only one answer: God must value each of us very highly. At the funeral of baseball great Stan Musial, one of his grandsons said, "My grandfather always made nobodies feel like somebodies." God does the same to us. Let us do the same for ourselves and for each other. AMEN!