

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138

Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)

Luke 11:1-13

Most of you know that in another life.....the one I had before I became a priest.....I was a psychotherapist and I had a private practice in Manassas. Most of my clients were individuals.....adults and teenagers, but I also did work with couples and I did work with families. The families were always the most interesting as well as the most challenging. I worked a lot with the parents who would express their sense of guilt at their children's behavior....their sense of frustration in not being able to influence their teenagers.....and their sense of failure when they looked at their own children. These were always very poignant moments for me because I could tell how much they loved their children and how much they were blaming themselves for whatever was going on. There are, of course, strategies that parents can use to prompt certain behaviors from their children, but it was always hard to convince them that their children brought their own personality quirks to the table and that they weren't as powerful as parents as they thought. Eventually I would get around to asking them this question. *Who do you believe is the perfect parent?* Even if they professed no faith at all, they would almost always say to me with great conviction: *God*. With a smile I could tell them, "That's right. God is the perfect parent. Do you think he's having any trouble with his children?"

Point made.

Bringing in the notion of families and parents makes perfect sense when we're going to talk about the gospel lesson this morning. The whole message is about God's relationship to us as the Good Parent.

Jesus has been praying and when he rejoins the disciples they ask him about this. Luke's gospel is full of references to Jesus' praying: he was praying after his baptism when the dove descended on him; he was praying at the top of Mt. Tabor when the Transfiguration happened; he periodically withdrew from the crowds to pray; and, of course, he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified. Prayer is a very important part of Jesus' life and ministry.

But what is happening during these prayers? Why is prayer important? Why did Jesus do it so often? And what does it tell us that some of the most dramatic moments that we know about Jesus were bathed in prayer?

Now, most people are spiritually sophisticated enough to know that prayer is not a Wish List that we offer up to God and God isn't Santa Claus waiting to give us our hearts' desire. So what is prayer and why did the disciples want Jesus to teach them how to do it? Most of his followers were praying people. The Jewish tradition is thickly woven with prayer, so why did these disciples feel they needed to be taught about prayer? They knew what prayer was.....but they saw something happening that was different when Jesus prayed and they wanted to know how to do what he was doing.

Prayer, you see, is our conversation with God. It is the way we connect with God spiritually. It is in many respects the way we get refueled. This is what the disciples noticed about Jesus and Jesus' prayers. After he prayed, Jesus seemed more resolute in his mission. He was more focused on what he needed to do. He was energized and replenished. He was able to double down on his efforts to do the will of God. It was almost as though Jesus got a spiritual transfusion when he prayed. He got the internal tanks filled up again.

There's nothing magic or supernatural about Jesus' answer to the disciples. His answer to them was to teach them the Lord's Prayer. It is brilliant in its simplicity. He spoke to them and gave them the words to the Lord's Prayer.....the prayer that the Lord taught all of us, not necessarily the prayer that he used. But it was a sufficient prayer and it covered everything that the disciples.....all of us in fact.....needed.

It begins with "Our Father." There are a couple of things to notice here. It begins with a plural pronoun and continues using the plural pronoun for the entire prayer. This is not a solo endeavor, even if we are praying alone in our rooms late at night or early in the morning. We are, even then, joined with every other soul who is praying to God. And Jesus tells us to address God as Father.....actually the word in Greek is Abba, which is equivalent to saying "Daddy" or "Papa." It's a very familial term that smacks of intimacy. One of the things that is important to know about how Jesus taught us to address God is that no self-respecting Jew in Jesus' day would ever have been so bold as to address his own earthly father in such intimate or affectionate terms. Jesus is conveying to us the sort of relationship that God wants to have with us.....intimate, affectionate, and familial.

And Jesus even locates God for us....."who art in heaven"just to remind us that we are here and God is there.

“Hallowed be thy name” We already know from the Ten Commandments that God does not want us to take his name in vain or to have any other gods before him. “Hallowed” is to be the most revered.....the ultimate in praise and glory.

“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus has brought us a little taste of the kingdom right here on earth. He has shown people what God’s kingdom is all about. He has let them see it and experience it. And he has sent his followers out into the world to tell other people about this kingdom that is beyond belief.....this kingdom where all the illnesses are healed.....all the people are treated fairly.....a place where every single person matters.....a place where there are no tears.....a place that is infused with love and love alone. But in order for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, we must *all* do God’s will. That’s a tall order, but worthy of our best efforts.

“Give us this day our daily bread.” Jesus knows that while we are here on the earth, we must have nourishment for our earthly bodies, so he is telling us to ask God for what we need. And it’s on a day-to-day basis.....give us our *daily* bread.....reminiscent of the manna God provided to the Israelites in the desert each day. That which wasn’t eaten that day spoiled overnight, so Jesus is telling us to ask for what we need for this day.....not for a week or for a month.....but just for this day. No hoarding or stockpiling allowed. There is a lot of trust involved here.....a lot of trusting God to take care of us.

“And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who are indebted to us.” We are asking God to release us from the burden of our sins. Without that forgiveness, we carry those sins around with us like a gunny sack slung over our shoulder that weighs us down and slows us on our journey. And Jesus tells us that as God releases us from the burden of our sin we are to release people who are in debt to us. We are to ‘let it go’whatever it is that stands between us and a restored relationship with someone else.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.” Jesus knows what that is like.....being brought to the time of trial.....being tempted for 40 days in the wilderness with no food and no drink and then at the end of his ministry facing his own death on the cross. He tells us to ask God not to put us through that kind of ordeal.

And then Jesus tells a story about a man who goes to his friend’s house in the middle of the night asking for bread to serve to an unexpected guest. His friend refuses, but Jesus says that with enough persistence in requesting the friend will relent and get up and give him the bread that he’s asked for. Moral of the story.....keep asking. If it’s important keep asking. Don’t relent. Don’t give up. The Old Testament lesson this morning is a tale about Abraham negotiating with God about the people of Sodom. Abraham keeps asking.....and keeps asking.....and God relents, bit by bit.....and Abraham keeps asking until God relents all together. If it’s important, Jesus tells them.....keep asking.

And Jesus reminds us that God knows what we need and if we ask for something that we need, God will fill our need.....even if filling our need is not exactly filled in the way we had envisioned. And doesn't that happen to us so much of the time? Sometimes that's hard to see or to figure out. God knows, better than we do, what we actually need and he knows the circumstances in which we find ourselves, so in the midst of all that persistence we need to also remember that very often God's answer is better than our request! Even human parents give good things to their children. They love them. But Jesus reminds us that God loves us even more and God even gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

Right here at St. Paul's, God has given us the Holy Spirit. He gave it to the parishioners who were gathered at Shrinemont last weekend. If you weren't able to be with us, please know that we missed you and hopefully we have brought that Holy Spirit experience back with us. The Holy Spirit was in the laughter we shared playing games. It was in the things we experienced as we figured out what it was like to be on the inside of the circle and on the outside of the circle. The Holy Spirit was in all the noise in the dining hall and all the delicious food that was put before us. It was in the ideas that were generated when we brainstormed about Coffee Hour. The Holy Spirit was in the sudden thunderstorm that swept over us on Saturday afternoon. It was in the conversations we had sitting out on the front porch of the cottage and it was in the impromptu singing around the bonfire. And the Holy Spirit was there with us when we worshiped in the Cathedral of the Transfiguration.

The Holy Spirit was given to us all weekend long and we won't soon forget it. We have brought it back with us, but this place.....the Sanctuary and this church building..... is already filled with the Holy Spirit as so many visitors have confessed to me. It's quite remarkable how many people tell me that they can feel the presence of the Holy Spirit here at St. Paul's. It's sacred and it is life-giving and we know as the body of Christ in Bailey's Crossroads, we are nourished and sheltered by that Holy Spirit and we are also energized and knocked off dead center by it. Sometimes the Holy Spirit takes our breath away.....and sometimes the Holy Spirit propels us into our future. Such is the nature of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.