

“Audacious Prayer”

Genesis 18:20-33

July 28, 2013

10th Sunday After Pentecost

Imagine the following scenario: you go to Washington D.C. to the gate in front of the White House and expect that you should be able to just waltz in and speak to the President of the United States of America because you had some concerns, requests, and suggestions about how he should set policy. Do you actually think you would be admitted and be able to have such a conversation? Do you think the president would actually do what you personally asked him to do? If you do, you probably are mistaken in one of two ways..

First, you may have overestimated your own importance if you thought you could come directly into the presence of the president to speak your mind and expect him to listen to you and grant your requests. Secondly, you may have underestimated the importance of the president. Often considered to be the most powerful and most important person in the world, why would the President of the United States have the time or take the time to listen to you? Even if he did, why do you think he would do anything to address your concerns?

It is this same dynamic which we face when considering prayer, the main theme of our readings for today. If we think we can stand in the presence of God on our own, address Him with our desires, and expect Him to listen and answer, we are mistaken in one of two of the same ways as our previous scenario.

First, we overestimate our own personal importance and worth to stand before God. We think that we are good enough to come before God, that we have a right to be heard by Him, and that He should immediately do what we want in order to make us happy. But the Lord is a holy God. We are sinful human beings. We are not good enough to come into His holy presence – none of us. We have no right to speak in the presence of the Lord – not a single word. His Law condemns us for not perfectly obeying what it commands and for not perfectly refraining from what it condemns. The

condemnation is so complete, Paul says in Romans, “that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” (Rom. 3:19) As far as expecting the granting of our requests, we deserve nothing good from His hand – not a single thing. The only thing we deserve is death now on earth and death forever in hell.

Secondly, we may underestimate God’s holiness and what it means. We like to think of God as a kindly grandfather with a long flowing white beard who sits on a throne (or rocking chair) in heaven, loving us just the way we are, patting us on the head and urging us to try our best; when we do wrong, telling us to do better the next time; and spoiling us by giving us everything we want like our grandfathers on earth did. But God’s holiness brings with it His anger against sin and His intolerance of it. This means He cannot allow or overlook any sin of any kind by anyone. Since He is a just God, He must punish sin and destroy it and all who have it. God is not a “heavenly genie” to give us what we want. He is a just Judge to give us what we deserve.

Yet, in our text, we have Abraham boldly standing in the presence of the Lord and audaciously asking Him to take action. If Abraham is a sinner like you and me (and he was) and he has no right to ask or expect anything from the Lord, how is he doing what he is doing and how is he getting away with it?

The difference in what should have happened and what is happening in our text is that the Lord, in His mercy and out of His great love for Abraham, had made a covenant with him. (You can read about it in Genesis 15.) Through the sacrifice of innocent victims (an ox, a goat, and a ram), blood was shed by which the Lord made a unilateral promise to be Abraham’s God, to bless him, to forgive him and bring him to the land the Lord had promised him.

Because of this, Abraham was able to stand in the Lord’s presence without being destroyed. He was able to bring His requests to the Lord and have them heard. Abraham, knowing that the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were going to be destroyed, prayed that the Lord would show mercy. This was especially near and dear to Abraham because his nephew, Lot, along with Lot’s wife

and two daughters, were living in Sodom at the time. Abraham pleaded with the Lord to spare the city if there were 50 righteous people in it. The Lord agreed to spare the city if 50 righteous people could be found.

The Lord allows Abraham to bargain with Him. He continues to pray, asking for the Lord to show mercy if there were 45, 40, 30, 20, or 10 righteous people were to be found in the city. The Lord, because of the covenant He made, patiently listens to Abraham a total of six times, and mercifully grants his requests. As you know, Sodom and Gomorrah were both destroyed when the Lord rained sulfur and fire down from heaven. A holy God acted justly in punishing sinful and wicked humanity. Yet, at the same time, the Lord was merciful as Abraham had prayed. Lot, his wife, and two daughters were rescued from destruction by a loving Lord. Abraham's prayer had been heard. The Lord listened and showed mercy. The Lord answered the prayer in His time and in His way which maintained His justice and, at the same time, showed His mercy.

This is great news for us who are here today. Although we may have changed our view of ourselves today or, at least, had it influenced by our tolerant, non-judgmental, egalitarian society, not a one of us here today can stand on our own before a holy God without being destroyed. Not a one of us has a right to speak before a holy God, much less expect that He listen and give us what we want or need. Yet we pray here in church, at home, and many other places. How are we getting away with this without being destroyed as we deserve? How can we continue this with any sort of belief or confidence that our prayers are heard and will be answered?

The Lord has made a covenant with us as He did with Abraham. Only this covenant is much broader in scope and value. The covenant is not with an individual, a family, or a race as the one with Abraham and his people was. This covenant would be made with the entire world. This covenant would not be sealed with the sacrifice of mere animals – an ox, a goat, or a ram. This covenant would be made through the sacrifice of something far greater: His only Son, Jesus Christ. As John

the Baptist rightly proclaimed, He is the “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29)

Through the sacrifice of this innocent victim on the cross, blood was shed by which the Lord has made a unilateral promise to us to be our God, to bless us, to forgive us, and to bring us to the Promised Land in heaven. This is a promise which God will not break. This is a promise God cannot break for He Himself has established the covenant by which it has come into being.

This changes our entire status before God and His attitude toward us. In Holy Baptism, each of us has been united with Jesus’ death and burial. All of our sins have been buried with Jesus. In Holy Baptism, each of us has also been united with Jesus resurrection. We have been born again into a new life as sons and daughters of God through the powerful working of God. We were dead in our trespasses. We are now alive in Christ. We were sinful and unclean, deserving death and destruction. We are now declared to be holy and clean in His sight and are given life and every blessing.

This means we are free to come into the presence of God through the mediation of His Son, Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) Through Jesus, we are free to speak with God and make our requests known to Him as Abraham did. We are able to audaciously stand in the Lord’s presence without being destroyed. We are able to boldly bring our requests to the Lord. We can pray persistently like Abraham did and are encouraged to do so.

We are sure that the Lord mercifully hears our prayers, as He heard Abraham’s prayers. Out of love, we know He will answer our requests. As with Abraham, the answer may not be exactly the one for which we asked, but it will be the one which is best for us. He will always do what needs to be done for us. He will always give what we need to receive. As Jesus said in our Gospel reading for today, If we sinners can give good gifts some of the time, a holy God who is our Heavenly Father will give good gifts to His children all of the time.

So, come into the presence of our holy God without fear or hesitation. You have been forgiven and share in His holiness. Pray boldly and without ceasing. When praying for mercy, pray audaciously and relentlessly. The Lord God will hear your prayer and answer it in the way that is best for you.

You may never get an audience with the President of the United States. He may never listen to your needs and desires, nor will he do anything to help you personally. However, through Jesus Christ, you can always get an audience with the Creator of the universe. He will always listen to your prayers, great or small. He will always answer your prayers and do what is best for you. Don't miss this wonderful opportunity. Don't fail to use this wonderful gift. Pray. Amen.