

PRAY LIKE ABRAHAM

Genesis 18:20-32 | Seventh Sunday after Pentecost | July 25/28, 2019

[Abraham] said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

Jesu Juva!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In my office I have a piece of furniture called a *prie dieu*. That’s French for “pray to God.” That’s what this particular piece of furniture is designed for. It is an aid for prayer. It consists of a cushioned kneeling surface and a padded arm with a cubby underneath for storing prayer books. I had been looking for one of these for years, but was unwilling to drop the \$200+ on a new one. A year or two ago my wife called me from the Manitowoc Goodwill store and said, “Hey, they have one of those prayer kneeler things. It’s 8 bucks. You want it?” You know my answer.

Now please understand: I don’t tell you this to brag about my prayer life. Just the opposite. I tell you this by way of confession. I’m a Christian man. I’m a pastor, an ordained minister of the gospel. My life should be one of prayer, right? I even have a special piece of furniture for just that purpose. But the time I spend on my knees in prayer – well, it’s embarrassing. That piece of furniture with the fancy French name is hardly worn out. It looks as nice and new as the day my wife brought it to me.

I’m guessing that most of you would confess a similar lack of devotion in prayer. In the portion of his Word before

us today the God who graciously hears and answers our prayers encourages us to do better. He puts before us the example of Abraham. Abraham was a man of prayer. We would do well to imitate him. So let’s learn today to PRAY LIKE ABRAHAM. In your life of prayer be humble, be unselfish, and be persistent.

I. Be Humble

Abraham had just been through one of the most important experiences of his life. Three men – really the Lord himself along with two angels – stopped by for a visit. They gave Abraham a shocking promise: In one year his wife Sarah would give birth to a son. As these “men” were leaving, they looked toward the city of Sodom, a city renowned for its wickedness. God made clear that he was going to destroy this vile city along with its sister city Gomorrah.

At this point we are told: **The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.** Abraham had something to say. Before we get to the content of his prayer I want you to notice the attitude with which he brought it before the Lord. Not far into his prayer Abraham said, **“Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust**

and ashes ...”

Before Adam fell into sin God warned him about the consequences of eating the forbidden fruit: **“When you eat of it you will surely die”** (Genesis 2:17). With the bitter taste of that fruit still in Adam’s mouth, God confirmed the consequences: **“Dust you are and to dust you will return”** (3:19). Does this help you to understand what Abraham meant when he called himself “dust and ashes”? In no uncertain terms he was saying, “I am a sinner, unworthy to ask you for anything.” He recognized that any answer God gave to his prayer would not be based his merit or worthiness but purely on God’s mercy.

Sin makes us unworthy to come before our God in prayer. Isaiah wrote: **Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.** Our sin is like cotton stuffed in God’s ears. Sin builds a sound-proof barrier that no prayer can penetrate.

Yet Abraham dared to come before God with his request. Why? It wasn’t arrogance of presumption. Nor did Abraham think God would simply overlook and ignore his sin. No, Abraham came with the confidence that our God is a God of faithful grace, a God of compassion and mercy, a God of love and forgiveness. Remember: God had just promised him a son, and from that son the Savior would one day descend. That’s what gave Abraham confidence to pray.

We have that same confidence. God has pulled the cotton out his ears. He has torn

down that sound-proof wall. He sent his Son to restore our broken relationship and repair the severed connection. Moments ago we heard these words: **There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people** (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Jesus carried all our sin to the cross where priceless blood flowed from his holy veins to wash it all way, to ransom our souls from slavery. In him we are forgiven! He is our Mediator, our Go-Between. This is why we often close our prayers with “in Jesus’ name we pray” or “through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Because of Jesus we sinners can dare to come before our holy God in prayer. He has taken away our sin. And so our God is approachable in Christ.

Though we have the privilege of prayer, we don’t come before our God with a cocky attitude. Like Abraham we come in humility. We pray like the tax collector: **“God have mercy on me, a sinner”** (Luke 18:13). And God is merciful to us. He forgives all our sins in Christ. He hears and answers our prayer.

II. Be Unselfish

So what should we pray about? There’s literally nothing we can’t pray about, no topic is off the table. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus teaches us to focus on spiritual concerns first. Abraham takes it another direction. He teaches us to focus on others before ourselves. His was truly an unselfish prayer. He prayed not for himself but for any “righteous” people, believers who may have been living within wicked

Sodom's city limits, including his nephew Lot and his family. Abraham himself was not going to be impacted by God's holy judgment on Sodom. Fire and brimstone were not going to rain down on his head. He wasn't a city-dweller. He was a nomad. He lived in tents. No Abraham unselfishly prayed for the good of others.

In so doing he sets us an example worthy of our imitation. Praying for others is not our natural inclination. We tend to think of ourselves first. But when we remember how our Savior put us first, when we remember that he **"came not to be served but to serve,"** we will be moved to put others at the top of our prayer list.

A number of years ago there was a nurse came up with a good system for prioritizing her prayers. She used her hand. Each finger stood for someone in her life, someone who needed her prayers. Her thumb is closest to her. It reminded her to pray for those near and dear, her family and friends. Her second finger, used for pointing, reminded her to pray for all those who teach and guide others, like pastors and teachers. Her middle finger, the tallest finger, reminded her to pray for all those in positions of authority and leadership. We think of church leaders or government officials. Her fourth finger, the weakest finger, reminder her to pray for the sick and suffering. Finally, she came to the pinky finger, the smallest and least important finger. This finger stood for herself. She put herself last on her own prayer list.

Abraham today teaches us the same

lesson. Be unselfish. Pray for others first.

III. Be Persistent

And never give up. Abraham came to God six times to ask essentially the same thing: For the sake of the believers who live there, spare the wicked city of Sodom. Abraham brought this prayer over and over again. In today's Gospel Jesus taught us to do the same thing in these famous words: **"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you"** (Luke 11:9). Those words could be translated "keep on asking ... keep on seeking ... keep on knocking." Our Savior encourages boldness and persistence. He invites us to pray like Abraham.

On Monday I had the opportunity to play a round of golf with a dear friend. We teed it up at The Golf Course at Branch River. It's a beautiful course, pristine fairways, immaculate greens. And Monday was a beautiful day, perfect weather. In spite of my score, it was an enjoyable round of golf. There was only one problem: gnats. The course is situated on swampland along the Branch River, perfect breeding ground for the pesky insects. No matter where you go a cloud of gnats keeps you company. You can shoo them away by waving your hands or your hat, but they come right back. They are relentless, the picture of tenacity and persistence.

Dear friends, be like those gnats. Be relentless and tenacious. Bother God. Don't give him a break. This is what he wants. Paul wrote: **Pray continually** (1

Thessalonians 5:17). The parable of the persistent widow is prefaced with these words: **Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up** (Luke 18:1).

We do this, we pray persistently, trusting that God will not try to wave us away. No, he delights in the prayers of his believing children. He loves to hear and answer for our good. That's his promise: **"Everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened"** (Luke 11:10).

Did God answer Abraham's prayer? I mean, Sodom was destroyed. He did. In fact, he did even more than he promised. Although there were not ten believers to be found in all of wicked Sodom, God did rescue Lot and his family. God is gracious and compassionate. He is the God who answers prayer. Never stop coming before his throne of grace.

I'd like to close with a story. A pastor went to visit an elderly member who was on his deathbed. As the pastor came into the room and sat down he noticed an empty chair pulled up to the other side of the bed. He said, "Looks like I'm not your first visitor today." The old man nodded and said, "Well, pastor, I'll tell you about that chair. Years ago I found it hard to pray. So I talked to my pastor about it. He told me not to worry about kneeling or placing myself in some pious posture, or trying to come up with flowery words. He told me instead to set up a chair, imagine that Jesus was sitting in that chair, and to just talk to him as I would a dear friend. That's

what I've been doing ever since." The next day the man's daughter called to say that he had died during the night. She added, "I noticed that his hand was lying on an empty chair beside the bed. Isn't that strange?" The pastor responded, "Nope. Not strange at all."

My friends, don't let prayer be strange to you. A gracious and forgiving God invites you to pray. Jesus shed his blood to give you this privilege. Come before your Father's throne of grace. Come with a humble heart. Come unselfish requests. Come before him again and again. Do so trusting that, for the sake of his Son, our God hears and answers. Amen.

S.D.G.