

Message for September 6, 2020

Genesis 18:22-33

Luke 11:5-13

While I took it for granted at the time, the neighbourhood where I grew up in Oakville was a little bit ahead of its time in the sense that it was both multi-lingual and multi-cultural. The neighbourhood was built in the decade after the Second World War and became the home for many people who emigrated from Europe, especially the Italians and Portuguese. Indeed two distinct smells marked spring and fall in my neighbourhood. In the spring it was the smell of manure destined to fertilize the neighbours' gardens and in the fall it was the smell of grapes, destined to become homemade wine. As I grew older, immigrants from non-European countries started to arrive and of course they brought their own traditions as well. Most of these traditions caused little stir but one certainly did.

Many of the new arrivals came from cultures where haggling over the price of an item was taken for granted and they found it inconceivable that a person would just walk into a store and pay the sticker price. Sometimes it seemed as if people wanted to haggle over the price of everything whether it was a newspaper, a loaf of bread or whatever else. Some of the attempted bargaining sessions were a wonder to behold but none of them even began to compare with the one described in today's first scripture passage.

At the time of today's first scripture passage God had decided to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as a punishment for their wicked ways. This prospect however filled Abraham with horror, possibly because his nephew Lot lived in Sodom. In a desperate effort to try and save the city, Abraham asked God: "What about the good righteous people who live there; must they perish too?"

Much to Abraham's surprise, God agreed with him. The city would not be destroyed if fifty righteous people could be found there. Abraham however wasn't content to leave it at that. Just suppose there were only forty-five righteous people living there, would God still destroy the place?

God agreed that he wouldn't. Well then said Abraham, suppose there were only forty, or thirty, or perhaps even twenty righteous people? Each time God agreed with Abraham; the city would be spared. Finally Abraham asked, "Suppose there are ten there?" God answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it" and with that the great bargaining session ended.

Down through the ages some people have been disturbed by Abraham's behaviour that day and it's certainly not hard to see why. Abraham wheeled and dealt with God just as he would have with any ordinary person at the local bazaar and this isn't the way we usually think of relating to God. Why God is God and under no circumstances should we be bargaining with him in prayer trying to come up with the best deal possible! And yet this is what Abraham did! By the same token God shouldn't have lowered himself by bargaining with Abraham either; and yet he did! Truly, today's lesson is an odd one but it is also one that tells us a lot about what our relationship with God can and in fact should be like.

I have often thought that as Christians we are called to try and maintain a very fine balance between two extremes when it comes to how we relate to God. On the one hand we can become far too familiar with God and forget about just who and what he is. Obviously this is wrong. While God does indeed love us, he is still God and so is worthy of, and in fact even demands our respect and obedience. But while we may sometimes forget about God's holiness, at other times we can become too focused on God's majesty. We can forget that God is approachable and that he even wants us to talk to him in prayer. This in fact is one of the main points of today's second scripture passage.

One day while teaching the disciples about prayer, Jesus told them that God is more than willing to both listen to and possibly even grant prayers. Jesus then used two examples to illustrate this.

First of all he said, suppose the disciples had a friend who suddenly had unexpected company arrive. If that friend came to them and asked for three loaves of bread so that he might feed his guests, would they give it to him? Of course they would! Or suppose Jesus said, your son wanted a

fish or egg to eat; would they give him a serpent or scorpion instead? Of course not! And if we human beings, who are anything but perfect, are approachable and will grant other people's requests, then how much more approachable is God?

God truly is approachable and may in his wisdom grant our requests too. But as approachable as God is and as eager as he is to hear our prayers, there are three important things that we have to remember when it comes to prayer.

The first is having the right motives. Perhaps it's obvious but when we pray, we should not be greedy or selfish. Neither should we ask for things that would hurt others or be to their detriment. Indeed why should God favour us over his other beloved children? We must also strive to be honest in prayer and under no circumstances should we play games with God as the following little girl did.

One night as her parents listened, a little girl said her usual memorized prayer but before she ended she added a new line: "And dear Lord, please send the lovely snow to keep the flowers warm all winter." Her parents stood there beaming with pride because of her apparent thoughtfulness but her next statement set them straight; "I guess I sure fooled God this time! I really want the snow to come so I can play with my brand new sled!"

What are our motives when we pray? While we should consider our motives before we pray though, we should also do something else when we pray; we should try and be specific.

So often our personal prayers may consist of little more than vague generalities; generalities that while sounding good really don't mean that much. We may for example pray, "Lord help me to be a better Christian" and that certainly sounds nice; indeed I'm sure that all of us would like to be better Christians but just what are we asking of God? Rather than just ask God to help us to be better Christians, it is better to be specific, perhaps asking God to help us to be more patient with others for example. Or to use another example; it's fine to thank God for all the good things we

have and experience but just what good things do we have in mind? The more specific we are in prayer then, the better and more meaningful our prayer will be. But while we ought to have the right motives and be as specific as possible when we pray, there is one last thing that we should do.

One day while driving through a small village in Pennsylvania, a minister saw the following sign: “Pray for a good harvest, but keep on hoeing”. When we think about it, this is good advice. It would be foolish for a farmer to ask God for a good crop if he or she wasn’t prepared to do their part to make it happen. So it is with all prayers. We may for example ask God to comfort the lonely and the shut-ins but what are we prepared to do to help? Or we may pray to God to bless our congregation but what are we prepared to contribute to its life and welfare? We may pray that the hungry of our community be fed but will we support the local food bank if we can do so? Of what real value are our prayers if we can do something to make them a reality but won’t? Work and prayer go together hand in hand.

In today’s first scripture passage Abraham got into a long and drawn out bargaining session with God. While I don’t think anyone should try and imitate Abraham’s behaviour, what he did does remind us about something very important; that God is approachable and in fact even wants to hear our prayers. Yet while we can and should take everything to God in prayer, there are three things that we ought to remember when praying. First of all, what are our motives? Secondly, is our prayer specific? Third and last, what if anything can we do to help God make our prayer a reality? Do these things take time and effort? Of course they do but then again, don’t all worthwhile relationships?