

July 24, 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

by [Michael Fick](#) in the [July 6, 2016](#) issue

What is the point of prayer? I have neither the space nor the theological expertise to address such a question in any definitive way. Yet there it is, writ large and looming in the texts from both the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospel for this Sunday in the throes of late July. The terrain seems fraught with places to trip and fall. Is prayer the means by which I might change the mind of God? Is it a reflex or a negotiation? The knock on a door that opens to the things I want, or the things I didn't even know I needed? Does prayer makes things happen, or change my perceptions of what "is" already?

In the Genesis reading, Abraham is deep in the territory of communication with God that feels dangerously full of possibility. Emissaries of the Most High have turned to the talk of Sodom and Gomorrah's "great sin," which I take to be a lack of hospitality and even violence toward those seeking refuge. Given the emphasis on hospitality in last Sunday's text from this chapter, that seems reasonable. God is going to do some reconnaissance and determine a course of action: Is there a redeemable kernel in those communities, or is the cleansing wrath of God imminent?

Abraham, in communication with God that I choose to think of as a form of prayer, begins a series of negotiations that seek to save even the smallest possible remnant of those now apparently infamous cities. As readers, we are not told here why Abraham has such compassion and concern for these towns or even the smallest portion of their inhabitants. But Abraham seems determined, even desperate, to encounter a God of mercy and grace whose judgments operate in a different realm than human reason. Human justice would delight in the demise of those considered wicked, but not so for Abraham. Nor, he hopes and believes, for God.

This is an aspect of mercy that requires the most of human beings. Abraham could have advocated for a process by which the wicked are sorted out from the righteous in ways that are consistent and predictable, at least on the surface. This is usually the purpose of what we might call a justice system: a judge determines, by a set of fairly inflexible standards, whether or not a person is guilty of an offense. That way, at least in theory, the guilty are punished and the innocent thrive.

But we know too well that as unavoidable as systems may be in the course of human affairs, they are imperfect. They are not always the kind of justice-making institutions that reflect our experience of God; for some people, they almost never are. Abraham is in the midst of a prayer that asks more of God—more patience, more mercy, more grace. That's a tall order in the face of institutional injustice. But the persistence of Abraham's prayer for divine self-accountability is received.

Likewise, when Jesus' disciple asks to be taught to pray, Jesus gives what we now know as a version of the Lord's Prayer. The implications of this form of prayer are wide ranging: acknowledging the power and wisdom of God, the one praying then asks for more and more patience, mercy, and grace. And the request is not only for the one praying, but—as with Abraham—even and especially for those who aren't even asking for such bread.

Jesus then doubles down: persistence, it seems, can provoke God to action. And that action is the giving of the Holy Spirit and more.

The danger here, of course, is sending the message to those persistent in prayer that if they have not seen the outcomes they long for, it is they or their prayers that are deficient. This is the challenge of speaking of prayer in general. Jesus invites and even instructs his followers to ask persistently, but it can be all too difficult to perceive just when and how God is listening or responding. People's needs are great and real, and shaming them with the suggestion that they or their prayers go unheard is no way to build up the body of Christ.

So what can be said that is honest and loving about a life of persistent prayer? First, that such a practice is not in vain, even as it is acknowledged that it is no magic formula. Second, that the very life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are centered in the prayer *your will be done*. Jesus himself prays this prayer from the shadow of the valley of death, and in the same voice prays, like Abraham before him, that mercy might be given even to those who show none. Finally, persistent prayer comes with the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Rather than offering outcomes that meet or defeat our expectations, persistent prayer invites us into transformative relationship with God.

Persistent prayer seems to mean appealing to the heart of God in response to the heart of God appealing to us. That's no cop-out, but it is a messy and complicated gospel, one that dwells both on the cross and in the empty tomb.

It does not resolve the mystery of prayer for me to acknowledge these contradictory realities. But Jesus' invitation does draw me in, persistently: When you pray, name God as your God. Yearn for God's reign. Ask for that which sustains you. Ask for the hard stuff, the impossible stuff. And expect to be held, challenged, blessed, and changed by the Holy Spirit.