

Shameless Prayer

Homily 17th Sunday Ordinary Time
July 24, 2022

In a world of convenience stores, we may lose sight of the difficulty the friend had in today's Gospel of giving his neighbour some bread. It wasn't just a question of going to the kitchen and grabbing some bread. The bread was usually made fresh for the meal itself. The wife probably did it so the man of the house was already either charting unexplored territory or facing the need to wake up his wife to prepare the bread. If the family had any animals, they would be making a racket at the arrival of shameless neighbour. We shouldn't imagine an ample home with rooms and appliances: the only fire, where the bread needed to be made, if it was a cold night, was surrounded by his sleeping family. If the noise didn't wake them up, stepping among and around them would as he got up to let in his friend and prepare bread.

In conveying this parable Jesus is telling us something essential about prayer, it is to be persistent and even disturbing as we continually knock on heaven's door. Jesus says that the neighbour answers the door not because the guy next door is his friend, but he is shameless in his willingness to rouse the entire household in order to get the bread needed for his night visitor.

So today I want to think with you about shameless prayer.

It is this kind of shamelessness that is on display in the first reading from Genesis. In this story we see Abraham bargaining with God, talking God down from 50 to 10, when it comes to God executing his judgment of Sodom, for the great outcry resulting from the city's grave sin. The gravity of the sin is described in detail in the 19th chapter, where all of the men of the town want to have sexual relations with two angelic night visitors who came to Abraham's nephew Lot. . What this story represents is the kind of perverse pleasure we as human beings can desire at the expense of others, be they human and angelic personages.

Perhaps you heard this week of the 500 athletes with Gymnastic Canada who signed a letter stating they had been sexually, emotionally and even physically abused by their coaches. This followed on the story a couple of weeks ago from Hockey Canada about other perverse sexual conduct. This kind of perversion is relentless be it in ancient Sodom, in the abuse scandals that have rocked the Church or in these most recent revelations.

What is therefore striking about Abraham's prayer is his shameless cry for clemency for God to spare Sodom's perversion for the sake of the few that are righteous in that city.

What this first reading sets up for us is the context in which we are called to pray. All of us are influenced by the perversion of Sodom, where we can be enticed, if not into this kind of twisted sexual desire, to choose to live our lives satisfying our base appetites. In the story Sodom tragically does end up being destroyed at the hand of God's judgment because not even ten righteous people could be found in the city.

As Christians we need to always read stories like these in light of Jesus and the Cross. This means that while the judgment on Sodom was one that resulted in the destruction of that city, Jesus is the one who experienced the full extent of human willfulness and self-centredness when he took into himself the Sin of the World by dying on the Cross.

Therefore we are invited to see in Abraham one who intercedes before God as a type of Christ. Jesus is the one who most fully cries out from the Cross for the Father to spare even those who were responsible for his crucifixion – these are not the righteous, as in Abraham’s appeal - but the guilty!

What we are to see therefore in the shameless boldness of the friend at midnight is the appeal we want to make before God to be like Abraham and Jesus, bold in our prayer as we knock on heaven’s door.

At the heart of our prayer is the desire that we would grow in righteousness – which Abraham appealed to in the first reading. So what is righteousness? It is the conscious decision we make to want to order our lives inspired by the Holy Spirit to be more like Jesus. We will ask, search and knock persistently in our desire to become ever more like the one in whose name we are gathered here today. Listen to Jesus’ promise. Using humour to make his point he says: Can you imagine a son asking his dad for a fish, and pop dropping a rattle snake on his plate - or a son asking for an omelet for breakfast is served up a creepy crawly predatory scorpion. This is crazy!

If an earthly father would not do something so twisted – but will give the fish or egg, how much more will the Heavenly Father give to us the Holy Spirit for those who truly and shamelessly ask for his indwelling presence. In other words if we truly desire to grow in righteousness God will enable that to happen.

And this is where the Lord’s Prayer comes into play. The essence of the Lord’s Prayer is that we should pray for two things: first for God’s name to be hallowed, loved, and praised, and second for our daily bread—that is, for whatever God knows we need for today. We ourselves can fulfill the first petition—“hallowed be your name”—by actually hallowing and loving and praising God in our prayers. And God will always fulfill our second petition—“give us each day our daily bread,” our needs, beginning with the forgiveness of our sins.

All that we should pray for comes down to the one prayer Christ himself gave us; and that prayer itself comes down to just those two things. It’s difficult not because it’s too complex but because it’s too simple. We ourselves make it complicated. It’s hard for us to be simple. But we have to be, because we are what we love and desire, and if what we love is not ultimately one thing, then we ourselves are not ultimately one person but many. If we worship many gods, we become many, like the poor demon-possessed man Jesus met. When Jesus asked him his name, the man could not say “I am,” but only “Legion is my name. There are many of us” (Mark 5:9). Don’t be many. Don’t be a polytheist. Be a faithful lover. Give God your whole heart and your whole life, including your time, your money, and your sex life. Keep nothing back. Don’t negotiate—surrender! It’s much harder to hold some things back and keep negotiating, and much easier to simply surrender everything to God. It’s much harder to love God with half your heart than to love him with your whole heart.

As philosopher Peter Kreeft has commented.

To love God with half your heart is like bigamy. You can't give your whole heart to more than one other. The first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul and your whole strength and your whole mind (Mark 12:29–31). The Lord's Prayer is a way to do that.¹

Oh, of course we keep renegeing on that surrender. In that sense it's not easy to give God your whole heart, because our hearts are divided. But every time we fall into sin because our heart is divided, we can keep coming back to that resolution to love him with our whole heart.

It is this kind of shameless prayer Jesus is inviting us to offer so that we can like Abraham and Jesus learn to be single minded..... as illustrated by the pesky neighbour at midnight.

¹ Kreeft, Peter. Food for the Soul: Reflections on the Mass Readings (Cycle C) (p. 577). Word On Fire. Kindle Edition.