

Homily for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

July 24, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Genesis 18:20-32 (Abraham intercedes for the innocent in Sodom and Gomorrah.)

Responsory: Psalm 138 (Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me.)

Second Reading: Colossians 2:12-14 (We have died and risen with Christ through baptism.)

Gospel: Luke 11:1-13 (Jesus instructs his disciples about prayer.)

Today's gospel brings together several teachings about prayer. It begins with Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, which we all recognize, even though it's a bit shorter and more succinct than the "Our Father" that we learned as children. Then, after suggesting that particular way of prayer to his disciples, Jesus tells a parable about *persistence* in praying for what we truly need. Then, he follows up with the famous "Ask and you shall receive" passage, which we all know so well, though our experience might cast doubt on whether it's actually true. (Haven't all of us prayed fervently for things which we *did not receive*?) I think it's quite helpful to hear all of these teachings *together*, because, collectively, they lead us to a fuller understanding of how we should present our needs and desires to the Lord, and how we should expect God to respond to our requests.

Key to understanding Jesus' view of prayer is his image of God as a loving Father. Jesus called God his "*Abba*," a term of affection, similar to "Dad." So, it's not surprising that he encourages us to approach God with the same trust with which a child would approach his own dad. We don't need to grovel before the Lord like Abraham, saying, "See how I am presuming to speak to the Lord, though I am but dust and ashes!" There's no need to be so melodramatic! We can just ask and trust that we will receive. We can seek what we need from the Lord and know that we will find. We can knock on heaven's door and fully expect it to be opened to us. And, the reason for this confidence is *not* just that Jesus says so. The main reason is *our baptism*. At our baptism, God claimed us as his own and declared us to be his *beloved sons and daughters*. And so, as his children, we have every right to bring our needs before our Heavenly Father and expect him to listen, to care, and to answer us. Not only that, we can trust him to give us only *good things* in response to our prayers. Isn't that what any good father would do for his beloved children?

Jesus emphasizes this point by reminding us that even ordinary parents know how to give good gifts to their children. You don't need to be divine, or even *holy*, for that matter, in order to respond lovingly to your own children. "What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish," Jesus asks, "or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg?" Obviously, no one would do such a thing. So, Jesus concludes that our Father in heaven, who is *far* wiser and more loving than any of us, will surely do what is best for his children.

Note, however, that most parents are wise enough not to indulge their children's every desire. Sometimes the most loving response to a child's request is to explain as gently as possible why what they're asking for is not the best thing for them to have right now. God also refrains from indulging our every desire. Sometimes our prayers are answered in pretty much

the way that we wanted. Other times, we end up getting something even better than we anticipated. But, quite often our prayers are met with *silence*, which is hard to interpret. We can't know for sure whether we're getting a firm "No," or more of a, "Let's wait and see." Either way, the lack of a clear answer tests our patience and our faith.

Jesus' parable about the neighbor who comes pounding on the door in the middle of the night *seems to suggest* that we should just keep insisting until our demands are met. Of course, the parable isn't exactly clear on that point. Jesus says that the man will get up and give the neighbor "*whatever he needs.*" That could be the three loaves that he requested, or perhaps something else. Think about how a parent might respond to a small child who gets hungry an hour before dinner is going to be served. The kid wants to fill his stomach right now, but the parent is likely to give him just a small snack to tide him over and calm him down. It's an answer to his request, but not exactly what he wanted. The parent knows that when dinner is served, the kid will be happy that he didn't stuff himself an hour earlier. I think our Heavenly Father often does something similar for us. Many of the blessings that we receive and the consolations that we feel in the midst of our prayer might be God's way of saying, "I have better things in store for you, but here's a little something for you to enjoy now. And, know that I hear you and I love you."

If Jesus had wanted to be more accurate about how God responds to prayers, I think he would have said, "Everyone who asks, receives... *something good.*" It might not be what we asked for, but it *will* be something good. Likewise, the one who seeks, finds... *something good*, but not necessarily the thing that he was seeking. And, to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. But, what we find on the other side of that door may surprise us. This is why it's best not to be too specific with our prayers of petition, or too certain that we're asking for the right thing. Remember that old saying, "Be careful what you ask for; you might just get it." Sometimes we don't know the full ramifications of our prayers. If God were to say "Yes" to *everything* we ask, I'm not sure that we would be better off.

The Our Father is an excellent model for prayer, because it demonstrates both confidence in God's love *and* openness to God's will, especially the petition, "Give us each day our daily bread." That's probably a reference to the manna in the desert, which the Israelites were supposed to gather each morning, trusting that the Lord would keep providing more each day. In our case, that line suggests that we are comfortable turning to the Lord *every single day* to express our dependence on his providential care. As his loving children, we know that he will take care of us and give us all that we need, *including* forgiveness of our sins and protection from all evil. So, even though there's no harm in placing more specific needs before the Lord, in our *daily prayer*, it might be best to keep it simple, and trust God to answer in the way that he knows is best.