

**First Impressions 17<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

Genesis 18: 20-32 Psalm 138 Colossians 2: 12-14 Luke 11: 1-13

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

Today's gospel has several segments, but they come under a general rubric: a teaching on prayer. What's striking about the passage is something we might just take for granted—Jesus prayed. Jesus and his disciples are journeying to Jerusalem, and he has told them that suffering awaits him and those who would follow him. Prayer is a major theme in Luke's gospel and today we are reminded how important prayer was for Jesus. He was on familiar terms with God and the intimate way he spoke of God aroused the ire of his opponents. His disciples have heard how he has spoken about God, have seen him pray on numerous occasions and now ask him to teach them to pray. They must also have sensed how important prayer was in Jesus' life.

They aren't asking for a catalogue of prayers, an "approved list" of Jesus' favorite prayers, or a list of required prayers that disciples should pray if they are to qualify being called Jesus' disciples. They sense that the relationship Jesus has with God is unique and they want to learn about it and share in it. Jesus doesn't disappoint them because the prayer he prescribes, "the Lord's Prayer," while exceptionally succinct, reveals the familial relationship he has with God. He wants to reveal and share this relationship with his followers.

First, he teaches them a prayer. It begins with Abba/Father. He is telling his disciples that for them, God is not a distant potentate, not a God on a smoking mountain somewhere. Rather, God is close, like a tender and loving parent. Jesus could have stopped right there, for he is not telling us some secret code name for God that, if we use it, will get us special favors. Rather, he is inviting his disciples to believe in the God he intimately knows, a God who is a close and loving parent, one who is bound to us and cares for us the way parents tend to and love a little child. What he revealed would have been enough for his disciples to learn and act upon. He has revealed the relationship we can have with God. He has opened a way for us to approach God in prayer with a sense of trust that, because of Christ, we too share in an intimate relationship with God. Jesus' life was not without pain, disappointment and death; but he was sustained through it all by his faith in his Abba. That is what he is offering his disciples when he reveals his God to us. What follows is, as they say, "just a footnote," to what he has just said.

The prayer Jesus teaches has brief statements that reflect what he has said about God: "When you pray, say Abba/Father, hallowed be your name." So, believing what we do about God, we want God's name to be hallowed. God is loving creator of us all and is holy. We want the rule

of this loving God to be over all creation and all human affairs. May all life be guided by and obedient to God's ways. Having praised and acknowledged the goodness and holiness of God, the prayer turns to naming our personal needs. What Jesus has told us about God enables us to pray with confidence that each day we will be given the bread we need—our “daily bread.” God is the One who can and will provide with what we truly need to live the life Jesus calls us to live.

Since we are still in the process of becoming disciples, we continue to fall short and so we pray for forgiveness for our sins. Because we have been forgiven we forgive those indebted to us. And, because we have not forgiven others we continue to ask for forgiveness. Followers of Christ who call upon God as he taught us to, are assured of forgiveness and there is no excuse for us not to do the same for those who have offended us. It is what God wants; it is what we pray to be able to do.

Along the way we notice that Jesus is teaching us to pray in the first-person plural: “give us...forgive us...do not subject us....” The very prayer Jesus teaches us also reaffirms our unity with one another in Christ. Baptism has united us into a praying community and praying “the Lord's Prayer” continues to strengthen the bonds that unite us. We pray as a community and at the Eucharist each member of the community is fed the same bread—the community's daily bread.

The prayer ends with an acknowledgment. We know our fragility; we know how easily we give into daily temptation. How will we be sustained in both daily testing and “the final test”—at the end of time? The prayer Jesus teaches us in response to his disciples' request, flows from what he says at the beginning, “When you pray, say Abba/Father.” It is as if he is saying, “Since your God is your loving parent, here is what you should pray about.” Notice how brief and general the prayer is? Even in the face of daily testing and “the final test,” we place our trust in the God Jesus has revealed to us. He encourages us to believe in our loving Parent. This God will not let us be swept away because of either small or ultimate testings.

The subsequent parable on prayer only reinforces what Jesus has already said—in case we didn't get it! In the parable of the midnight visitor the peasant family has already retired for the night. The whole family would be asleep in one room and so they would have been disturbed by the inopportune knock on the door and the request for bread. The petitioner is shamelessly persistent, and his needs are eventually met. Jesus is suggesting that since a neighbor would respond to a request for bread, even when asked at the wrong time and when the response would have been an inconvenience—how much more would “Abba” respond to the person who prays constantly? God will far exceed even what our “friend” and “neighbor” might do for us.

So, we shouldn't be ashamed to "ask," "seek," and "knock," since we know the goodness of the One we asking, seeking and imploring. But Jesus isn't teaching us how to pray for whatever we want. He continues his teaching, again reminding us of the One to whom we are praying. No loving parent would give a snake or a scorpion to a hungry child seeking a fish. Jesus' example of a snake and scorpion is vivid, and we easily get the point. Our Parent knows what we need and will not give us anything that will harm us. Sometimes children reach out for what can hurt them, but a loving parent uses caution and wisdom to feed them what will truly nourish them. Jesus' brief parables have driven home his teaching. Our God is not harsh or demanding, but is a loving Parent who gives us only what is good for us and is ready to respond when we ask: "How much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?"

We are "seekers," searching for God's kingdom, yearning for it to come and hoping to recognize it when it comes into our daily lives. For that we need the Holy Spirit, for on our own we can readily miss what is of God. Luke's gospel is a story about the Spirit: the Spirit brought Jesus into the world and filled him at his baptism. Jesus' ministry demonstrated what a Spirit-filled and Spirit-directed life looks like. Jesus promises this same Spirit to his disciples and The Acts of the Apostles shows that when the Spirit descends on the community, they too begin to live the Spirit-filled life Jesus lived: the poor were cared for; the dead were raised; the blind and lame were healed; the crippled walked and three times, when the disciples were imprisoned, God opened their prison doors and set them free. The Spirit worked through the disciples to help them live Jesus' life in the world. When the early church met opposition, it was the Spirit that sustained them and gave Paul and the other disciples the words to respond to their accusers.

Jesus ends his teaching on prayer by inviting us to ask God for the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is this Spirit who will enable us to pray in the confident and trusting manner Jesus has taught us. Judging from the subsequent account in Acts, of the community's life after Pentecost, it is also the Spirit who will be an assuring presence, encouraging us to seek and find the divine in our lives and helping us to make the world a place of love and justice for all people. It is the Spirit who moves us to pray and acts to bring about this kind of world when we pray, "Your kingdom come."

### **JUSTICE NOTES**

***"Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1)***

**Striving to live the life of peace and justice of the Gospel will also call us to a deeper life of prayer.**

“Our social ministry must be anchored in prayer, where we uncover the depths of God’s call to seek justice and pursue peace.” (*US Catholic Bishops: Communities of Salt and Light*)

*“Entering into contemplative prayer is like entering into the Eucharistic liturgy: we "gather up" the heart, recollect our whole being under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter into the presence of him who awaits us. We let our masks fall and turn our hearts back to the Lord who loves us.”*

“Contemplative prayer is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more.”

“Contemplative prayer is the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer. In it the Father strengthens our inner being with power through his Spirit "that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith" and we may be "grounded in love."

“Contemplative prayer is *hearing* the Word of God. Far from being passive, such attentiveness is the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child. It participates in the "Yes" of the Son become servant and the *Fiat* of God's lowly handmaid.”(#2709-#2719 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)



**Centering Prayer** is one *method* of prayer, which prepares us to receive the gift of God's presence, traditionally called [contemplative prayer](#).

#### ***The Guidelines for Centering Prayer***

- **Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.**
- **Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.**
- **When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.**
- **At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes**

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

*"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person."*

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Johnny Hyde                      #0542024    (On death row since 7/23/98)
- Patrick Steen                    #0388640    (8/28/98)
- Robert Brweington            #0584095    (9/3/98)

---Central Prison    1300 Western Blvd.    Raleigh, NC    27606