

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 17th SUNDAY -C-
Genesis 18: 20-32 Psalm 138 Colossians 2: 12-14 Luke 11: 1-13
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Who hasn't heard of Sodom and Gomorrah? The ancient town epitomize sin and godless places where no respectable person would want to live or even visit. Street preachers, and some pulpit ones as well, condemn certain modern cities or sections of cities, as Sodom and Gomorrah's and promise them sure destruction. Strange that in today's Genesis reading God isn't requiring that the towns repent of their sins and put on sack cloths and ashes. Rather, Abraham is allowed to look for the just inhabitants among them. Ultimately, after his negotiations with God, Abraham just has to find ten just people and if he does, the entire population will be spared. Is it possible that the just ones in our midst, those who live God's ways and practice justice, are the ones that are keeping us from being destroyed? ... Not from an avenging God perhaps, but at our own hands. Are the voices of sanity in our land keeping us from the excesses of violence, vengeance, materialism, ecological disaster, etc.? Are they the persistent voices that keep calling us back to God and away from our paths of self-destruction? Maybe the ancient Jewish people, who were in the minority in most places they lived, saw themselves and their task in the world to keep alive awareness and devotion to the true God. Though they were insignificant, nevertheless they were the shining lights in the darkness of a world whose people were turned away from the face of God and toward their own image in the mirror.

Remember the scene of this charming story. Abraham and Sarah have been visited by God in the guise of three travelers (Yahweh and two companions?). Abraham offers them hospitality and afterward God tells them, despite their old age, Sarah will bear a son within the year. Abraham accompanies the visitors toward Sodom. After some reflection (8:17 ff.) God decides to tell Abraham of God's plan to destroy Sodom. Then begins Abraham's intercession on behalf of the cities. Just a few righteous ones are all that is needed to save the population. The preacher may want to name or tell a story of those who "save" the city: those who call us to our sensibilities, who remind us of the right path, who call church and nation back to God's ways. They save us from ourselves, keep us from following our less noble instincts.

Abraham's bargaining with God sounds like a middle eastern market place. Wouldn't the Jewish listeners to the story chuckle over this scene? Who else but the Jews, themselves the recipients of mercy, could imagine a God that could be talked out of prior plans? Wouldn't they admire Abraham's audacity to negotiate with God? None of the other nations of the time

had a God with whom one could get so chummy. Abraham takes a prophet's stance before God, interceding on behalf of the just. How remarkable it is that God allows Abraham to survive! Any other potentate-god would have struck dead such brazenness. This God of Israel is different. One notes from the reading the entire Genesis account that God is already disposed towards the margined. (Abraham and Sarah are good examples of God's reaching out to the left-out ones.)

This passage links with today's gospel. In both, God is depicted as approachable and flexible. The servant can approach God in boldness and confidence because there is nothing to fear from God. The Genesis passage shows a loving exchange between God and Abraham; they are depicted as two friends walking and talking together on the road to Sodom. The "bargaining" that Abraham does with God isn't like the "deals" people sometimes make, as if God needs to be bribed, "If you do this for me, I promise I will...." Rather, the One making the concessions isn't Abraham, but God, who freely "marks down the price".

Jesus prays a lot in Luke's Gospel. Prayer accompanies him on his journey to Jerusalem, all the way to his death, when he prays from the cross. What will keep him on course through his arduous journey? What will focus his vision? Prayer---constant prayer at each stage of his travels. He is being followed, he can never get far from his disciples. They notice him at prayer. Certainly they already knew how to pray, but they must have detected something unique about Jesus and his way of praying. Maybe the way he lived revealed something special about his relationship with God. "Teach us to pray....," they ask him, and he does. Luke has gathered several of Jesus' sayings on prayer in this section.

Today's section is just too rich, too much to choose from and it would be hard to focus our preaching. You may want to choose one of the petitions in the "Lord's Prayer." Or focus on one of the parables that follows it. Another choice would be to draw out from the whole section a more general teaching about prayer using the passage's details as reference. That is the way I am leaning at this stage.

You can't help but notice that the prayer Jesus gives here in Luke is different from the one in Matthew. What's going on here? Which is the "correct" one? Well, it seems that the gospel writers are less concerned with exact formulas as they are about the spirit of prayer that Jesus is conveying. They must have gotten this emphasis from Jesus. So, he is answering the request, "Teach us to pray...." not "Teach us WHAT to pray."

The "Lord's Prayer" shares the spirit of intimacy with God the disciple should feel as he/she prays. The opening intimate name for God Jesus gives is "Abba"—a term of endearment that

expresses a filial relationship. That's how to pray. Abraham prays as one talking to a friend; Jesus prayed as a beloved child talking to a parent. That was the trust Jesus carried right up and through his crucifixion. We surrender our lives daily into the hands of a tender parent. Disciples express daily dependence and daily confidence when we pray for "daily bread." As Patricia Datchuck Sanchez says, this is a bread that "keeps on giving" and in asking for it we are expressing, "continual dependence on God for life, sustenance and every other blessing....today, tomorrow, every day. [CELEBRATION, July 29, 2001---which is an ecumenical homily service— 1-800-333-7373]

The short parables continue in a similar vein. The first, the midnight request shows persistence. Not that we have to talk God into giving us what we need, or wear God down, as much as express our own constant and daily fidelity to God. We won't wander off to other gods, other places to satisfy our needs. Rather, we will be constant, knowing we have only one God, one true source for what we truly need to complete our journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. Be careful with this parable. It is not that God is like the sleepy man on the inside of the house who finally gets worn down by the petitioner's persistence. The parable is like a long question, as if to ask, "Which of you would act this way?" The presumed response is, "None of us." Then the conclusion suggests, if a person would respond to a friend in need, "how much more would God?"

The text continues, reminding us that prayer is not an on-again, off-again thing. It is ongoing, doesn't give up. "Ask....seek....knock" it encourages us. But these verbs should really be written in a different grammatical form because in the original language they translate as, "asking...seeking....knocking." Again, the suggestion is to persistence and daily awareness through prayer of our dependence. We know who the One is who will give us what we really need and so we stay in touch and remind ourselves of our dependency by what we pray and how often we pray. This constancy makes us aware of the loving God whose hands are always reaching out to us with exactly the gifts we need as Jesus' disciples.

Another parable is given, encouraging us to draw the same conclusion... "How much more." If one of our earthly parents would give good things in response to a needy child's request, "how much more"--- and here the parable shifts—how much more will God "give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?" How did the Holy Spirit enter all this? God knows more about our needs than we do. We are in the area of "good gifts" and so the Spirit is just that, the really good gift God wants to give us. This is the gift we really need.

My summer reading has been Elizabeth A. Johnson's award-winning theological text, SHE WHO IS. (See below.) Johnson says the Spirit brings us three experiences of God.

First: the Spirit brings us God's indwelling nearness. Our God is not aloof, a distant mountain dweller above the fray of our lives. Instead, the Spirit is the living God, "at her closest to the world pervading the whole and each creature to awaken life and mutual kinship." (p. 147) The Spirit is God fully present to us.

Second: the Spirit counters any sense that God is neutral in human affairs. It is clear from the biblical texts that the Spirit frees captives and favors the oppressed. The Spirit is bound to compassion for the world and reveals God's power to heal the sick.

Third: the Spirit is related to the world and establishes relationship between us and God and between us and other humans. Wherever relationship and freedom are opposed, the Spirit works to overcome any dichotomy, bridge any gap, and work in us to bring justice to those who cry out for it.

Thus, Jesus assures us that one prayer we can make with confidence is to ask for the Spirit. This best of gifts God gives freely and abundantly. It is, as Sanchez would say, the gift that "keeps on giving."

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Elizabeth A. Johnson, *SHE WHO IS: THE MYSTERY OF GOD IN FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE*. New York: Crossroad, 1992. Paper, \$15.95, 316 pages.

A solid theological work that engages Christian theology from a feminist perspective. Not only theological in its tone but evokes a prayer of praise as it widens the tent of our knowledge of God. It would make a serious and thoughtful read for a retreat. It is also helpful in reviewing the biblical and classical theological treatments of God. Her aim, she says, "is to speak a good word about the mystery of God recognizable within the contours of Christian faith that will serve the emancipatory praxis of women and men, to the benefit of all creation, both human beings and the earth". (p. 8)

JUSTICE NOTES:

US Dominican Delegations to Iraq

Dominican Sisters and Friars of the US visited Iraq three years in a row starting in 1999 to see for themselves the ravages of the sanctions on the people. At the end of the last visit to Iraq, the delegation declared in a statement:

During our ten days in Iraq we have witnessed the destruction of a land, people, and culture, an action more insidious and far-reaching than any in the history of the United Nations. Every aspect of Iraqi society and culture has been adversely affected by the sanctions. In the 1980s,

Iraq possessed an effective universal health care system and universal free education, modern telecommunications technology, and adequate power resources. The country had sophisticated water treatment systems that met the needs of most of the population.

Now, after ten years, the Iraqi infrastructure can no longer bear the weight of human need. Women of childbearing age and especially children continue to suffer from high levels of malnutrition resulting in arrested development and diminished capacity to reach their full potential. The air and water are toxic. ..Those who suffer most are children, an entire generation who have known nothing but war. Nearly 10 million Iraqis are under the age of fifteen...What hope is there as a nation when sanctions deprive them of clean water, adequate nutrition, medical treatment and education?

—from the webpage of “Franciscans and Dominicans for Human Rights at the U. N. in Geneva