

## Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Petitionary Prayer

July 28, 2019

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Today Jesus exhorts us to bring before God all our hopes and fears, all that we desire for ourselves and for those we love. But we might ask ourselves why we would do such a thing. Does not God already know all that we want? In fact does God not already know what we want better than we do ourselves? And do we not also believe that God already desires that everything works out for the best? Are we praying for God to change his mind?

In our first reading Abraham appears to be doing just that. He appears to be haggling with God, to get God to relent, to change his mind. But even though God appears to listen to Abraham, even appears to agree with him, God still does what he intended to do all along. So what was the result of all of Abraham's haggling?

The result was not a change in God but a change in Abraham. Through his prayer to God, Abraham is able to express his solidarity with the people of Sodom and Gemorrah. Through his prayer to God, Abraham is able to express his solicitude for them. And through his prayer to God, Abraham is able to come to terms with what is to happen to them, seeing it no longer as merely an act of God's wrath. God acts as he had always intended to act, but Abraham can now understand God's punishment not as a violation of God's goodness, or God's love, but as an act of God's care, an act of divine providence.

So too with us. When we pray to God to relieve our suffering, we are not complaining that God has neglected us, or that he has acted without regard for us, as if God did not care or was not paying attention. Rather we are crying out to God that we feel afraid that we have been neglected, that we have been abandoned. We are asking for God to reassure us, to set us straight. We are trying to regain our perspective.

Or when we pray for others who are in pain, or fearful, who feel overwhelmed or who are in danger of being overcome by the forces of evil. We are not reminding God to watch out for them, we are not making sure that God does not forget them in their time of need. Rather we are expressing our own solidarity with them. We are saying that we cannot be silent in the face of such suffering and yet we are also acknowledging, perhaps painfully acknowledging, our own limitations, that we ourselves cannot save them from their distress. We are saying that as much as we want them to be spared this affliction or trial, that our own arms are too short to protect them. That we place our faith in God's own saving arm.

When we pray for others, then, we are not questioning whether God cares, we are rather professing that we care, that we care terribly, and that we need to say so, even though we know God already knows and cares even more than we. In praying for others we are reminding them and us that in spite of how things may now seem, that they are not facing this struggle by themselves, on their own, but that they are still in our hearts and in God's hands.

In today's Gospel, Jesus' disciples ask him how they ought to pray, and Jesus responds similarly. He teaches us to approach God as we would approach our father--or our mother. He teaches us to ask for what we want while reaffirming that what we ultimately want is what God wants, for like a parent we trust that God wills what is ultimately for the best for us, his children. Not that there is any danger that God might fail to accomplish his will, but that we need to express our concern anyway, for we cannot remain silent in the grip of such anxieties, or in the presence of such suffering among those we love. We are to pray to God for ourselves and for our neighbor that we might remind ourselves of what is important to us, and that we might know how we are to act ourselves--by acting as we pray our Father act, by feeding us our daily bread and delivering us from evil; by asking forgiveness for where we have failed or hurt others, by forgiving those who have failed or hurt us.

We need to pray, for ourselves and for others, not because we need to worry over what God will do, but because our hope and especially our love so far exceeds what we can do ourselves. We need to pray to God, because we are not gods. And we need to pray to God because we need reminding that it is OK that we are not gods, for we are God's, his very own sons and daughters, and that blessed with his love and his grace we need for nothing more.