

Lectionary 17 C, July 28, 2019, Genesis 18:2-32, Luke 11:1-13, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt Strause

In the wonderful musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye is a poor Russian Jewish farmer, struggling to scratch out a living in in early 1900's Russia as a milkman, maintaining his family and religious traditions while the outside world encroaches on his life. Tevye faith in God runs deep. Throughout the play Tevye always talks. Talks to his wife, Golda, talks to his daughters trying to convince them to marry good men, but most of all talks to God. In one scene Tevye is out delivering milk, pulling his own cart because his horse has gone lame, wearing his prayer shawl as a reminder that even in the midst of daily work he is still in God's presence. He then asks God, "Dear God, you made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor. But it's no great honor either! So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?" Tevye implores God for a little fortune to come his way and tells God a little extra money would allow him the time to study the holy Bible and discuss the faith with the learned men in the synagogue.

I think of Tevye when I hear the story of Abraham persistently asking God about the fate of Sodom, the notoriously wicked and doomed city known for their violence and evil. God's wrath burns hot against Sodom. God resolves to to destroy it by raining down fire and brimstone. But Abraham boldly, audaciously, approaches God and negotiates a stay of execution. He appeals to God's own inherent justice. "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" God relents destroying Sodom for the sake of fifty good and righteous people. Then Abraham begins his negotiations. For the sake of forty-five will you destroy the city? For the sake of forty, thirty, twenty, ten?

Amazingly, God listens to Abraham. Even though it seems God's mind is made up, Abraham doesn't take that as God's final answer. He keeps coming back, humbly, but persistently. And here's the amazing thing. God listens. God takes Abraham's prayer seriously. God reconsiders. And finally, after hearing Abraham out, God resolves to spare the city if at least ten righteous people are found there.

Jesus takes up the same theme in his teaching on prayer that we heard in our gospel reading this morning. The disciples request Jesus to teach them how to pray. He teaches them a prayer which is beloved in God's church; the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer has become the model prayer for Christian worship. It is the prayer we teach to our children, it is the daily prayer of Christian devotion, and it is the central prayer of our communal worship. The prayer is addressed to our Father, who is first "ours" because we always pray as a community even when we are alone in our room praying this prayer. And the prayer is addressed to "Father"

because the Father is the One to whom Jesus prayed. Because Jesus is our brother we are bold to pray as he did, naming the God of his prayers as our Father.

Throughout our praying Jesus tells us to be persistent. Like the one who knocks on a friend's door in the middle of the night requesting food for a late-arriving guest. We are to be bold, audacious in our requests, trusting God who hears our prayers and takes them seriously, considers them and even acts on them. Like Abraham we are to ask boldly, but also humbly, come to God in prayer and make our requests known.

I know this sounds strange to our modern ears. We are used to thinking the universe is already fixed, that God already has a plan and a decree for the way things are going to turn out, and that God knows what's going to happen even before it happens. What difference does prayer really make anyway, if God has already determined how everything is going to turn out?

Except that's not the witness of holy scripture. Throughout the Bible we hear of men and women who lift up their voices to God in prayer and God listens to their cries and he responds and acts upon them. It is one of the great distinguishing characteristics of the God we worship that he listens to us and regards our requests as a parent listens to a child. Not everything a child asks for is going to be granted by a parent. The parent really does know what's best for the child, even though the child may really want it. But there are also times, when a parent's mind is seemingly made up and a child will make a request and the parent will say to herself, "That seems reasonable and maybe it's time I allow what he is asking for," and the request is granted. That's how God regards us, as his children, who desires us to come in child-like trust and listens to our requests. We may not receive everything for which we ask, because God ultimately knows our own good. But that we are to ask and God takes our asking into consideration is a precious and beautiful promise indeed.

Jesus teaches how to pray, using the Lord's prayer as a model. He also models prayer for us, praying always to the Father. The heart of all our praying is simply speaking to the Father with Jesus our brother at our side, helping us and guiding us in prayer. We are to be bold in our prayer, just as Abraham was bold. We are to trust in God's promises that he hears us and listens to us, because Jesus is risen. Amen.