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"Ask and you will receive." Really? That promise is repeated in [Matthew 7:7](#) and [John 14:13-14](#). But beware: Jesus doesn't say what you will receive, only that you will receive.

Perhaps our tradition's first theological investigation of prayer comes in today's first reading where Abraham sounds almost like an auctioneer in reverse: Can 50 good people save the city? 45? 40? 30? 20? 10? One thing we see here is that Abraham didn't have much faith in the people of Sodom — he worried that God might not find even 10 good people in that legendary city!

The real debate is not about numbers. Abraham lived in a political atmosphere of sin and retribution, crime and punishment. Policies built on this thinking make the absurd assumption that hurting a perpetrator will be good for the victim when all it really does is lower the victim to the level of the perpetrator. Not much that's life-giving there!

Abraham's theological complaint was that God was portrayed as acting like a despot, revengefully punishing those who transgressed. Note, when visitors had left, "the Lord remained standing before Abraham."

## **Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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Genesis 18:20-32

Psalms 138

Colossians 2:12-14

Luke 11:1-13

It's as if God were saying, "OK, ask me about what's bothering you."

God also asked, "Should I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" Another sign that God encouraged Abraham's interrogation.

Underneath the question of the innocent suffering because of evil people — a blatant fact of life — Abraham is ultimately asking, "Does evil rule the world? Do the innocent make any difference in the world?" That's a perennial question — especially sharp in times of war, dictatorship, corruption and the victimization of the weak by the strong. So Abraham puts God on trial: "Should not the judge of all the world act with justice?"

These questions come from a belief that God is in charge of everything that happens. God decides and creation, be it people or nature, carries God's will into action.

Another question like Abraham's is, "Why bother to pray if God has already written the script?" Or do we believe, as some say, that if we pray hard enough, God will relent in punishment or cure our beloved's cancer, make the sun shine for the picnic, etc.? Do we really think that prayer functions to change God's will about hard things that are in process?

Many times, we ask, "What would Jesus say?" In this case, we have an answer in today's Gospel. The disciples ask, "Teach us to pray." Ultimately, this question asks, "How are we supposed to relate to God?" and "What can we expect from God?"

Jesus' response is simple. Go to God as a child to a parent, trusting in the Father's love. Also, look around creation. Let yourself be carried away in wondrous awe, then say, 'Hallowed!' Blessed! Overwhelming is your very name!"

Say, "May your desires for creation come true! Your will be done!"

Jesus reminds us that the creator of the universe has given us what we need. Our daily (*epiousios*) bread is a phrase Jesus seems to have invented. More than day-to-day, it suggests something more like the bread of tomorrow, the coming age, the bread that is consecrated by how it is shared and nourishes.

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Seeing that, "Give us our daily bread," offers a different perspective on "Your kingdom come."

As a grand finale in this prayer asking for the establishment of God's will, Jesus cuts to the chase: "Forgive us as we forgive."

Is this a tit-for-tat, "You'll forgive us if we forgive each other?" That hardly sounds like the God we meet in Jesus.

Suppose that this is yet another petition for the establishment of God's reign? In that case, we might interpret it to say, "Lead us to be like you, seeing possibility rather than injury, believing like Abraham that evil does not have the upper hand."

Do we really want God's rule? Then we have to keep badgering those who have the power to make it happen, to feed the hungry, to give children what they need, to rise above retribution and to value justice and harmony over any kind of supremacy.

At the end of this discourse on prayer, we hear Jesus say, "Ask and you will receive." Now note, Jesus isn't promising a bike, a cure for cancer, a safe pregnancy or anything like that. No, what Jesus promises is that if we ask, and apparently only if we ask or allow it, God's Spirit will be with us.

For what should we pray? How can we relate to God the Father as Jesus did? The woman who taught Jesus to pray gives us the same answer he does: "When you pray say, 'Behold, I am your servant, do with and in and through me according to your will.' "

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