

Sunday 17

July 23, 2010

It is very clear that our readings today are about prayer, and about a particular kind of prayer, the kind in which we ask God for something. And the lesson these readings want to teach us is that we must be persistent in this kind of praying. Abraham won't let God go. He keeps coming back with another request, and each time he reduces the number of just people in Sodom: What if there are only forty? What if there are only thirty? What if there are only ten? And Jesus uses three different verbs to tell us to persist in praying: ask, seek, knock. The last verb, to knock, is the most impressive of course because we have all had the experience of ringing a bell and then waiting for someone to answer, and then ringing again when no one has answered. We usually go away after the third try, but the Lord is telling us that we should just keep ringing, just keep knocking.

That is also the point of the short story he tells us about the inconsiderate man who comes knocking at his friend's door in the middle of the night. What person in his or her right mind would call a friend in the middle of the night, except in the case of the most dire necessity? But this man is knocking simply because he

didn't have food in his house to entertain a guest. Yes, hospitality is important, but a call at midnight about that! And his friend responds to the call not out of friendship but simply to be rid of him and be able to go back to bed. But there is no midnight for God! We can never come at an inopportune time. We can knock at anytime and God will answer, and God will answer not simply to be rid of us but out of love, out of friendship, for us. Do we believe that? Do we really believe that God loves us—even at midnight?

The last line of this Gospel can be disconcerting. A good father, Jesus tells us, won't give his child a snake when he asks for a fish, or a scorpion when he asks for an egg. Good, we get that. But then we think that the Lord is going to say that the Father will give us much more than fish and eggs, will give us even more extraordinarily good gifts. But what does Jesus now say? God will give us the Holy Spirit. Is that the best gift the Father can give us? That is what Jesus is telling us, it seems.

If God gives us the Holy Spirit, what is God giving us? God is giving us Himself, and in giving us Himself God is also giving us a new self, a new identity, a new personality. What is the best gift parents can give their children? It is not something material. No, it is their love, a love which will show itself in a thousand different

ways in daily life. And that love will then take root in their children's and give them healthy personalities. When parents do that, they are imitating what God does with us. In giving us the Spirit, God gives us God's very own reality, the Holy Spirit, and this gift makes us new people. It changes our personalities.

In his second Letter to the Corinthians (3: 17-18) St. Paul describes this gift of the Holy Spirit as our transformation. He writes: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit." Yes, the gift of the Spirit is the best of gifts the Lord can give us. It is the gift of God's very self, and it will transform us. It will make us new people if we let it, if we persist in our prayer, if we keep knocking.