

“Prayer, Persistence, and Community”
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Eunice Koch - July 28, 2007

Genesis 18:20-33

Colossians 2:6-15

Luke 11:1-13

Psalm 138

When I attend a traditional church, you know, one with pews and kneelers, I enter, kneel and pray. Then I read the bulletin, first looking for a social event, especially one with food. Next I move on to look at the lectionary readings for the day.

After guessing which one would be the basis of the sermon, I always start to look for a common theme. Most times I can find a pair, sometimes I can see something common in three but almost always I have trouble finding a common thread in the Psalm.

Not so with today's readings. In the reading from Luke, the disciples saw the wonderful works that Jesus performed. They also saw that he withdrew to pray and did so frequently. Did one of them see a connection ~ "Teach us how to pray."?

After Jesus gives them the outline for effective prayer He goes on to give a lesson in persistence. The person in the parable, asking for aid, keeps at it. Persistence and prayer go together.

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, urges the congregation to continue in Christ, another kind of persistence.

The lesson from Genesis is a blueprint for persistence. Abraham kept at it. More persistence and pray together. And the Psalter reading? "O LORD, your love endures for ever;" Well, isn't endurance another form of persistence? And isn't it comforting to know that God persists in loving us?

Looking at the readings a little more closely, we see that each one offers ideas and questions worthy of investigation.

Abraham's conversation with God indicates that the people of faith, early on, recognized that the Creator is merciful and that God responds to the requests of mercy for others.

By his questioning, Abraham is asking God for a living example of justice, a remnant community to show sinners the face of a just God. Only one question remained. How small could a community be to act as an example of a just and merciful God?

Abraham persisted until God and he agreed upon the number ten.

Was the number ten the size of Lot's family? Whatever the reason for settling on ten, ten became, in Jewish tradition, the minimum number needed to start a synagogue and the minimum number needed to hold services at a synagogue. How do we feel about ten being the minimum number of believers necessary to form a faith community? Is there a traditional maximum?

Now on to Paul and the Colossians; this is a message as much for today as then. It is a call to get back to the basics. We will probably never know the exact details of the teachings that were leading the Colossians astray. It appears however, that they were dividing the community.

What human traditions might tend to lead us astray? Paul's answer, that Christ is sufficient for all things, is universal and timeless.

Re-examining Luke and prayer; if we look at it literally, we could assume we are getting the exact words of a prayer. I don't think that was Jesus' intention. I feel that he was giving a format for effective prayer. The Lord's Prayer is a wonderful part of our worship services but I don't believe it was intended for individual prayer, although I must confess to using it as a safety net -- a "spare tire" in times of emergency.

Nor do I feel that Jesus intended to teach that all we have to do is to pray hard enough and long enough and we can get God to do what we want. This can lead to real frustration. "I asked, but I didn't get what I wanted." Often when we pray we are too blinded by our own expectations that we do not leave room for God to work the way she chooses. And often we do not recognize the gift, the answer, we have been given.

Books have been written about the Lord's Prayer; on individual phrases. My favorite "commentary" on "lead us not into temptation" came from a grade-schooler who said it meant "no pop quizzes!" And, "forgive us our trespasses"?- does that mean that God only forgives if we have forgiven others? Or does it mean that we experience forgiveness in proportion to the quality and quantity of our forgiveness of others?

David, my Jewish friend from EfM in DC said that the Lord's Prayer was given by a Jewish rabbi to Jews and can be used by Jews of today.

The Psalm, 138, is especially rich. Its format seems to be echoed in the Lord's Prayer. Its reference to the lowly reminds me of Abraham praying for the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah. Its 'conversational' tone reminds me of the parable in Luke.

I couldn't pick a question or theme to expand on, so I am leaving that up to you.

But I will say that, in addition to the four lessons for today stressing persistence, especially persistence in prayer, there is another common element; that is community. Abraham is praying for a community; Paul is writing to a community, Jesus is teaching the community of His followers and the Psalm? It was probably sung as a part of community worship.

PRAYER, PERSISTENCE AND COMMUNITY

O LORD, your love endures forever; AMEN