

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6-7, 7-8

Colossians 2:12-14

Luke 11:1-13

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I'm a member of a religious order – The Congregation of Holy Cross. Founded in France, we have been in the United States for about 175 years. As a result, perhaps, of our long exposure to American culture, our relationships with one another are remarkably informal. For instance, all of us, from the provincial superior to the most recently ordained priest are on a first name basis. Regardless of the roles we play at work, when we are together, we are simply brothers. As a result, we are inclined to take one another for granted. So when one of us faces down an angry mob, confronts a dictator, wins a Congressional Gold Medal or the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize, there is, for the rest of us, a moment of surprise at what old Tom or Gerry or Ted or Dick has accomplished.

Outside the context of religious life, relationships most often work the other way round. We meet some august personage and feel awed by them. Then perhaps over time we get to know them better until one day we come to see them as a friend. Then, when we see them acting in their professional capacity, we are reminded of how extraordinary they really are.

It is this second pattern that we see played out in our scripture readings this week, in regard to humanity's relationship with God. In our First Reading from Genesis, Abraham negotiates with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. The incident occurs quite early on in Abraham's

relationship with God. Using groveling language appropriate to a supplicant appearing before an Asian potentate, Abraham asks God to spare the two cities if fifty innocent people can be found there. When God agrees to this proposal, Abraham presses the point further, getting God to agree to spare the cities if first forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty and finally only ten innocents can be found there. Now, Abraham has little reason to care about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. He is a nomadic pastoralist with little interest in cities and their inhabitants. Perhaps Abraham's real motivation in his audacious negotiation is to find out more about this God with whom he has cast his lot. What, he must be wondering, is this God really like. After all, the terrible anger God is expressing toward Sodom and Gomorrah might one day be directed toward Abraham himself. The good news that Abraham takes away from the encounter is that God's righteous anger is mitigated by God's justice and compassion.

The relationship that God initiates with Abraham carries on for many centuries through the Hebrew prophets and kings. In the course of time the relationship grows more intimate as the chosen people gain an ever-clearer understanding of what God is really like. Our Christian conviction is that this process reaches its consummation in Jesus Christ, who is the perfect self-revelation of God.

So, when in our Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples how to pray to God for what they want, the technique he teaches is vastly different from that employed so long ago by their ancestor Abraham. Whereas Abraham cries out with fear and trembling "See how I am presuming to speak to my Lord, though I am but dust and ashes!" Jesus urges a less formal approach. The disciples are to pray to God like a man importuning a

reluctant neighbor for three loaves of bread, or like a son asking his father for a fish or an egg. For Jesus, prayer is less like begging a favor from a dangerous tyrant, and more like the plea of a child who knows from long experience just how to get what she wants from a doting parent. This is the extraordinary intimacy to which God invites us in Christ. The magnitude of God's generosity in offering us this privileged relationship is brought home to us when we reflect on who God is. The God who is so inclined to embrace each of us like an indulgent parent, is the infinite Love who creates and sustains the universe. No wonder Abraham groveled.