

There is an ancient adage about prayer. If you are in a boat and you tie a line to a heavy rock and begin to haul in the rope, does the rock move toward you or do you move toward the rock? Maybe at times it feels like you are pulling the rock, but if you look up, you will see that you are no longer in the same place where you started. The rock is in the same place, but through pulling on that rope, the situation has changed. The rock is God and the line is prayer.

In the first reading from Genesis, we hear Abraham bargaining with God to spare the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham makes a case that the innocent should not suffer with the guilty. Spare the cities if there are 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, and at last 10 righteous people. And the scripture tells us that God agrees to Abraham's bargaining. There are many things happening in this reading.

First, we should note the power of innocent righteousness. A whole community can be saved by the goodness of a few. This is true. This is at the heart of salvation. There is not one person in the whole world who is sinless, who is truly just. Yet, God has provided our righteousness by coming himself, through the incarnate Word, and dying so that we may live. One willing sacrifice of innocence which brings salvation to the whole world. We who have died and risen with Christ in baptism are called Christians. Part of our mission is to be holy and innocent in a fallen world to bring those around us from death to life. We are to show another way of life in the midst of a world that is divided and violent.

When Abraham bargains with God, is God changing or is Abraham changing? Who is becoming more merciful? Is God becoming more like Abraham, or is Abraham becoming more like God? On the surface, it looks like God is being swayed by Abraham, but God doesn't change, human beings do. The whole arc of the story of Abraham in Genesis is how Abraham learns how to have a relationship with God that is different from the pagan idol worshipers around him. Humanity without God becomes brutal very quickly. That was true four thousand years ago and it is true today. Without a relationship with God, poor judgement and violence are never far away. What we hear in this reading is that as Abraham comes to know God, he comes to know mercy. He prays for mercy and he desires mercy. Bit by bit, he is emboldened to look for more. Thus, the image of the rope tied to a rock. Who is moved? We hear Abraham being transformed, becoming a man seeking salvation and not destruction.

Why do we pray? So that we can hold onto the rock. If we pray with the goal of changing God, then we will be disappointed. If we pray with the goal of holding onto the one who loves us, the creator of the universe, our savior, we have something to hold onto during the storms of life, someone who will lead us to a better place to be. Prayer is not pulling a string, but holding onto a lifeline. If you are persistent in prayer, you will not stay the same. Prayer doesn't make the tragedies of life disappear but it does change them.

Jesus, in the Gospel, encourages us to be persistent in prayer. Using the example of a beggar asking for food and eventually getting some, Jesus then says, how much more will our Father in heaven give to you because he loves you. How much more will you be able to hold firm during the storms of life when you hold onto the one who loves you.

When you pray, are you trying to make God be like you? Hold firm onto the rope, which is prayer, and pull yourself towards the rock who is God. If you are persistent, you will be more like God – merciful, loving, and just – ready to receive what is good.