



## Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 25, 2010 C

### LEARNING TO BE HONEST WITH GOD FROM OUR FATHER ABRAHAM

All great spiritual masters and directors will tell you that one of the keys to an effective mature prayer life is learning to be honest with God on *every* aspect of our lives. Without such honesty, our relationship with God will be superficial and ‘nice’ but not real.

Fortunately, the scriptures offer us many concrete examples of individuals who were honest with God. The Israelites understood themselves to be “partners with God” in the drama of history. When God acted, Israel did not remain silent. She responded. Sometimes she praised God: “Hurray, God!” (See Exodus 15 for a wonderful example of a Hurray God song.) But Israel also complained to God and questioned his ways. The psalms depict Israel’s gut-level responses to God’s action or perceived lack of action in their lives.

Today’s first reading is a wonderful example of a man being honest and upfront with God. In the following dialogue, God has just revealed to his friend Abraham his intention to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 18 & 19 for the full story).

When Abraham becomes aware of God’s intentions, he is shocked and probably angry with God. Abraham, being a man with a strong sense of justice, cannot believe that God would risk killing innocent people as he seeks to punish the guilty. Let’s eavesdrop on this wonderful conversation.

Abraham: *“Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? [Can you hear the passion in Abraham’s voice?] What if there are fifty innocent people in the city; would you wipe out the place, rather than spare it for the sake of the fifty innocent people within?”*

Then Abraham appeals to God’s sense of justice: *“Far be it for you to do such a thing, to make the innocent die with the guilty so that the innocent and the guilty would be treated alike! Should not the judge of all the world act with justice?”* [I feel like shouting: “Thank you, Abraham, for modeling for us honesty with God.”]

God: *“I will not destroy the city if I find forty-five innocent people.”*

Abraham: *“But what if there are forty innocent people?”* God promises to save the city for forty innocent people. But Abraham does not quit and he plucks up the courage to ask: *“What if there are thirty, twenty or even ten innocent people?”* While Abraham is very respectful of God, this does not keep him from pleading with God to save the innocent.

### ***Learning to be honest with God (and others) takes time and courage***

In the initial stages of a relationship, we are usually polite and nice to the other person. We avoid talking about issues that may cause tension or embarrassment. In wanting to impress the other person, we might make a special effort to come off “looking good” by concealing our true thoughts and feelings. But sooner or later, if the relationship is to mature, we will have to risk being honest and reveal our true selves. If the relationship can handle such honesty, it will grow and develop. If it cannot, it will remain superficial and polite.

Our relationship with God is pretty much like our relationship with others. We can treat God as “polite company” and never share our true self with him. Or we can be upfront with him about how we truly feel with our life situation. When you think about it—it is really foolish not to be our true self with God. After all, God knows us better than we know ourselves. So when we hide our true feelings, whom do we think we are kidding?

Nevertheless, learning to be truly honest with God is still very difficult especially if we were raised in a family where we might not have been allowed to express tough feelings like anger and frustration. Thus, our ability to convey our *true feelings and thoughts* with God will depend a lot on how easy or hard it is for us to be honest and upfront with others, especially our close friends.

Spiritual directors tell us that when God seems distant and our relationship with him is dry or boring, there is a good chance that we are not being honest with him about the real stuff that is going on in our lives.

Furthermore, many of us who grew up in the pre-Vatican era were taught that it was a sin to be angry with God, which is a big misconception, to say the least. Bottling up anger only leads to depression.

Learning to express our anger and frustrations in a calm way is healthy and very important for our personal and spiritual development.

Jeremiah and Moses are two other Old Testament figures who can teach us how to be honest with God.

Jeremiah is a rather quiet and gentle person but his “soul conversations” reveal that he sometimes engages in some tough dialogue with God. We are fortunate to find these conversations in his book in Hebrew Scriptures. Being a gentle person, Jeremiah is particularly sensitive to outbursts of hostility from the people he is trying to reach. Once, when faced with such hostility, he cries out in desperation: *“Cursed be the day on which I was born! May the day my mother gave me birth never be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, ‘A child, a son, has been born to you!’ filling him with great joy.”*

(Jer 20:14-15)

In another chapter, Jeremiah complains to God for the injustice of allowing evil people to prosper. He even suggests how God ought to deal with the wicked (Jer 12:1-3). Jeremiah also confronts God for the way he treats his servant and wonders if God has been lying to him (Jer 15:10-21).

Traveling with the Israelites through the desert, Moses has lots of reasons to be mad with both God and the people. In Exodus 5:22-23, we read these amazing words: *“Moses again had recourse to the Lord and said, ‘Lord, why do you treat these people so badly? And why did you send me on such a mission? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has maltreated these people of yours, and you have done nothing to rescue them.’”*

Honestly, can you ever see yourself speaking to God like that? As you hear Jeremiah and Moses speak to God, what are your thoughts and feelings? If you heard me talk to God like Moses and Jeremiah, would you be scandalized? I really think some people would. They would find my words to be very disrespectful, to say the least. But we can assume that God had no problem with the way Abraham, Jeremiah, Moses or the psalmists spoke to him. I would like to think that he was delighted that they were comfortable enough in their relationship with him to say exactly what was on their minds. Ideally, we should all want the people in our lives to be forthright and honest with us. I certainly like it.

### ***“Lord, teach us to pray”***

In today’s Gospel, the disciples are watching Jesus in prayer. They must be impressed for they are moved to ask: *“Lord, teach us to pray.”* Jesus responds with Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. (Matthew’s version is longer.) Scholars make much of the familiar way Jesus addresses God. The Hebrew word “*Abba*” is more accurately translated “Dada” or “Papa,” a title of endearment and intimacy. In Jesus’ time, addressing God as “Papa” or “Dada” was totally unheard of, yet this was how Jesus wanted his disciples to address God. Jesus is telling his disciples and us that God is not to be feared or regarded as some distant figure. Rather, he is to be approached with confidence and childlike trust.

Having proclaimed that God’s name should be “hallowed” (reverenced) and having prayed for God’s Kingdom to come, Jesus invokes three specific petitions:

- *“Give us each day our daily bread.”* Provide us with whatever we need to make it through this day. Let the cares of tomorrow wait until tomorrow.
- *“Forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone in debt to us.”* The assumption here is that we are willing to pass along to others the forgiveness God grants to us.
- *“Do not put us to the final test.”* This is a reference to both the temptations of everyday life and to the final tribulations that will usher in at the end times.

### ***Praying with perseverance***

Having taught his disciples to *whom* they should pray and for *what* they should pray (namely, bread, forgiveness, the kingdom, strength in time of temptation and trial), Jesus rounds off his lesson with advice on *how* to pray. The disciple should pray with unrelenting *persistence* and *perseverance*. Just as the man in need of bread did not quit knocking at his neighbor’s door, neither should we quit knocking at God’s door. A great example of persistent prayer is St. Monica, mother of St. Augustine. For 20 years or more, she daily knocked at God’s door asking for the conversion of her wayward son. Eventually, God answered her prayers. Why, we might ask, would it take God so long to answer such a good prayer (conversion of a son)? We don’t know. As St. Paul says in Romans 11:33-35, *“Who could ever know the mind of God? Who could be his counselor?”* A big piece of faith is trusting that “God knows best.”

After harassing God for years to explain his ways, Job finally quit, saying: *“My words have been frivolous: what can I reply? I had better lay my finger on my lips. I have spoken once...I will not speak again.”*

### **Six lessons about prayer from today's readings**

As we reflect on the first and third readings today, we can learn the following lessons on prayer:

- *Address God as Abba or Loving Father. Remember that we are in the presence of a loving Father, even if we do not feel much love coming from him.*
- *Like Abraham, be honest and direct with God about our needs and feelings.*
- *Like Abraham, be humble before God.*
- *Try to accept God's response to our prayer even if it is not what we had hoped for. (Despite Abraham's pleadings, Sodom went up in smoke.)*
- *Often ask for our daily bread, for forgiveness, for protection from the evil one, and for God's kingdom to come.*
- *Persevere and do not quit. Remember that God's timing is not our timing.*

### **Don't just pray; also act to make things happen**

An old saying regarding prayer goes:

*Pray as if everything depended on God.  
Act as if everything depended on yourself.*

The following cute little story is a great example of prayer and action working side by side.

*A little girl was telling her father about how some of the boys in the neighborhood had set traps to catch birds. He asked her what she did about it. "I prayed that the traps might not catch the birds," she said. "Anything else?" her father asked. "I prayed that God would keep the birds out of the traps." "Anything else?" "When the boys weren't looking I went and kicked all the traps to pieces."*

We shouldn't just pray for better health—we should do everything possible to improve our health with medicine, exercise, etc. We shouldn't just pray for God to change our spouse or friend—we should do everything possible to be a better spouse and friend. We shouldn't just pray for someone to come to church and be a better Christian—we should try daily to be a better witness of Christian living and invite that someone to come to church with us.

A word on prayer from St. Thérèse of Lisieux:

*I have not the courage to search through books  
for beautiful prayers...  
Unable either to say them all or choose between them,  
I do as a child would do who cannot read—  
I say just what I want to say to God, quite simply,  
and He never fails to understand.*

### **Another cute story**

St. Benedict was riding horseback from one monastery to the next. He passed a beggar who snarled: "If I had a horse, I could pray, too!" Benedict smiled: "Friend, if you can pray the Lord's Prayer without getting distracted, I will give you this horse." The beggar jumped right on: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...does the saddle come with it?"

Have a blessed week,

