

## 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Somebody asked me this week, “Why do we bother to ask God for favors when we pray? Why don’t we just say, ‘Thy will be done’?” The question surprised me because most people use prayer primarily to request favors. The worse your day is going, the more likely you will pray. The less control you have over a bad situation in your family, school or work, the more you ask God to step in and fix it. Asking for favors seems like a natural way to pray, a consumer’s way to pray. Sometimes we even bargain with God the way you strike a deal with a plumber or car dealership. “I want what you can do; tell me what I need to offer in order to get it.”

Often it’s hard for people to pray any other way. Yet the central prayer at mass is the eucharistic prayer, or the thanksgiving prayer. It starts with one reason after another for thanking God today - for creation, sending us Jesus, the gift of communion, and so on. Sometimes we have to remind ourselves that God wants to hear such praise, not just our petitions. God also wants to hear our contrition, not just our predicaments.

So, because we say “Thy will be done” every time we recite the Lord’s Prayer, should we not ask God for what we want? If we do, isn’t it like saying, “My will be done”? The simplest answer is that Jesus encouraged us to ask God for favors. He said, “Ask, and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” When he explained the metaphor of the vine and the branches, he added, “Ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.” In today’s gospel he tells the delightful parable of a cranky widow badgering a reluctant judge. Our translation has the judge say, “this widow keeps bothering me,” but a literal translation is, “this widow keeps beating on me.” Again in our translation, he decides to help “lest she finally come and strike me,” but literally, he says, “lest she finally come and give me a black eye.” It’s a colorful portrait of these two characters.

Luke is the only gospel that includes this parable, and it’s typical of Luke, who frequently reports how God helps the lowly. Luke himself explains this passage beforehand: “Jesus told his disciples a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary.” The meaning is clear right away.

Sometimes we get discouraged making our petitions known to God. After all, we pray a lot, and we do not always get what we want. It would be simpler to pray “Thy will be done” and be done with it. But Jesus counseled more. He plainly told us God likes to hear what we want; we should be like the persistent widow. God is not like the lazy judge; God will act quickly. Although the meaning of this parable, according to Luke, is for us to pray as the widow did, “without becoming weary,” another meaning we could derive is not to respond like the judge. People often ask our help. Sometimes it’s people in our own family. Many times when we have the opportunity to help someone, to lift their burdens, we don’t because it seems too burdensome for us. Then the person who wants our help does an end run - asking God since we won’t respond. We gain no points prompting people to pray without becoming weary when the reason for their repeated petition is our laziness. Jesus would probably be happier with us if, when the occasion presents itself, we give a speedy reply.

Sunday, October 20, 2019