

Week 17 – Ordinary Time – July 25, 2010

So this guy drives over to a sporting goods store, but he doesn't have much time, so, as he comes close, he offers this prayer: "O God, if you clear a parking space for me, I'll contribute \$100 to my parish church." He turns the corner and sees right in front of the store an open space. He lifts his head to God and says, "Never mind. I just found one."

We often bargain with God. "Let my kids be healthy, and I'll quit smoking." "Find me a job, and I'll start being more charitable." "Make the neighbors quieter, and I'll spend more time in prayer." Whatever. But when you think of it, we have no leverage with God. God doesn't need anything we have to offer. God gave it all to us in the first place.

This does not stop Abraham in today's first reading. Abraham has heard that God may want to wipe out the city of Sodom. Abraham has family there, and he wants to save them. As God's two messengers go into the city to investigate, Abraham blocks God's path and bargains. He appeals both to God's justice and mercy. He mainly argues that some innocent people live in Sodom. If the whole city is destroyed, God will be responsible for their deaths. Punishing the guilty is just, but sparing the innocent is merciful. You know this story well: Abraham gets God to agree that 50 innocent people could spare the whole city, and then he whittles the number down to 10. God agrees, and that's where today's reading ends, but the story goes on. Even though God agreed to the deal, Abraham could not find 10 innocent people. He found 4: his nephew Lot, whom he had already rescued from a kidnapping, Lot's wife, and their two daughters. God then exercised justice and mercy. Sodom is destroyed, but not before an angel takes Lot's family by the hand and leads them out to safety. You remember the tragic turn of events in this part of the story, too: Lot's wife disobeyed orders and looked back on the city. She was transformed into a pillar of salt. So out of the whole city, only 3 innocent people make it to safety.

Abraham gives us a good model for prayer. He wants something, but he asks for what he believes God wants too – he asks God to act with the mercy that is God's nature. This is still an effective way to pray. We ask God to act not just in a way that will make our lives better, but in a way that is consistent with God's good character.

This can also help us when – like Abraham – we don't get precisely what we want. We can trust what we are getting is consistent with God's good nature, no matter how mysterious that may be. If we don't get that parking space when we pray, it may be that God has a broader purpose in mind – someone else may need it more, or we may need the exercise. Often our request is more serious – such as sparing the life of a good person. But sometimes even that loss can make us better than we were before, teaching us how precious life is, and how important it is to make every day count.

God surely expects us to pray for the things we want, but when we pray also for what God wants, "thy will be done," it will please God and bring us deep peace.