

Death involves several stages. I'm sure you've heard these--people deny that they're dying, they get angry, they try bargaining with God, they despair and finally they accept. These are stages we go through with any crisis in our lives. Say, for example, you're running behind schedule. You grab a commuter mug full of coffee, you half-run to the car, put the key in the ignition and it won't start. First, you deny: This isn't happening to me. Then you get angry and push the key even harder to make the engine start out of brute force. You bargain. Maybe the engine's flooded and if I'm patient and sit here just a minute the car will behave. You despair. It's never going to start. And it doesn't. So, finally, you accept. You go inside, coffee in hand, and phone your destination, "I'm going to be late."

This is a simple example of things we do in greater or lesser dimension. I want to focus today on one part of this process, bargaining, because we do it a lot not just with cars, but with people, and even with God.

Some bargaining is good, of course. In business we do it all the time, and it benefits both sides of the contract. Even in marriage couples work out common arrangements for who does what and how the parties share responsibilities, and these are good agreements to have.

Many relationships, though, go deeper than bargaining. We do things not because someone else is going to respond but simply out of love for that person. You might bring that car that won't start into the shop, even though it belongs to your spouse and it's not your responsibility, simply because you love that person and don't expect anything in return. I'm sure you know from your own experience, there is a difference between bargaining an agreement and just doing something out of love.

Now, in our prayer, it's tempting in circumstances to bargain with God. God, I promise I will say morning prayers for a week straight if only the repair bill for the car is not too high. Perhaps we take on some lenten resolutions with this in mind--that if we do our part, we can convince God that He should do His. But there is a difference between bargaining out an agreement with God, and doing something out of love.

Today's first reading is a remarkable story about relating with God. Abram was about 75 years old when God promised him he would take possession of a great land and become the father of an entire nation. When you consider the magnitude of this offer and the nature of the One making the proposal, Abram had nothing to offer God in return. There is simply no possible bargain he could strike. God is acting out of love and He is acting alone. When the animal carcasses are arranged on the ground it is God Who walks through them, not Abram. It is God Who, in essence says, "Let what happened to these animals happen to Me if I don't keep the covenant." It's absurd, God is God, He doesn't have to do that, there is no one His equal with whom He could bargain.

How foolish we are if we think our prayer has to convince God to be good to us. It couldn't be done if we tried, nor is it necessary--God loves us and has no desire to bargain. *Our prayer* ~~our prayer, our fasting, our charity are best done out of love, not out of seeking a return in that futile attempt to outdo the generosity of God.~~

*And of course God always does the latter--he never bargains with us.*