

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 24, 2016

For several Sundays now, our readings from the Gospel of Luke have centered on the topic of what it means to be a disciple. Jesus began His instruction by saying that a disciple must "take up his cross and follow Jesus". Over the last three weeks, Jesus has told us exactly how we are to take up our cross and follow him.

Two weeks ago, we learned that we are to love God with all of our strength, soul, heart and mind. And in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we learned that we must also love our neighbor and to be a good neighbor. Last week, we learned from the story of Martha and Mary about how important it is for disciples to be attentive to the Word of God. And now this week, we hear about the importance of prayer in the life of those who follow Jesus.

And not just any kind of prayer, but *persistent* prayer. Think about the story of Abraham and how in his prayer he's bargaining with God to save the people of Sodom and Gomorra if he can find 50 righteous people, then 45 and so on all the way down to 10!

Can you imagine haggling with God? Well, why not? What gave Abraham the courage to talk to God with such humble assurance?

The reason Abraham is able to pray with this kind of intensity and intimacy and humility is because of his close and personal relationship he had with God. A relationship that is rare and in some ways unique in the Old Testament but a relationship that is available to each of us here today because of the Incarnation, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Through Abraham's bargaining, Abraham also begins the prayerful ministry of intercession. Intercessory prayer is form of prayer that will be taken up by all the prophets and ultimately by Christ Himself who intercedes for us constantly to the Father.

And because of our union with Christ through the Sacraments, especially in the

Eucharistic celebration of the Mass, we are called to intercede with God for the sake of our families, our parish community, and our friends and for the whole world!

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is itself a series of short petitions that function as dialogue-openers intended to lead us into deeper relationship with God. Meditating on each phrase can lead us to understand how Jesus made those petitions a part of his life and how we might incorporate each into our own life.

When the disciple asked Jesus to teach them to pray he recognized that praying is something we learn. We might say that Adam and Eve learned prayer from God in the garden and that it's been handed down ever since. Just as Jesus had to be taught to talk, so too his parents instructed him in the ways of prayer – from the prayers of scripture to their own way of relating with God.

We can actually see Mary's influence in the prayer he taught the disciples because it parallels almost every phrase of the Magnificat Mary prayed during her visit with Elizabeth. Jesus said, "Father, hallowed be your name." She said, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

He said "your kingdom come," and she proclaimed that God had overthrown tyrants, dumbfounding the arrogant. Jesus prayed for bread and she rejoiced that God had filled the hungry with good things. Jesus told his disciples to pray for forgiveness and she proclaimed that God's mercy reaches from age to age.

Jesus taught them to pray, "Do not subject us to the test," and she prayed, "God has helped Israel." In essence, Mary's prayer rejoiced in the fulfillment of all the petitions Jesus taught his followers. No wonder we call her the woman of faith!

After giving his disciples this short course on how to pray, Jesus picked up the theme of persistence in prayer. He taught his disciples...and us...that we are to pray unceasingly because it's through unceasing prayer that Jesus derived his spiritual strength and power.

The parable of the persistent neighbor gives us two important reasons for persevering in prayer and the key phrase for each of these lessons is "How much more".

For example, if a neighbor shamelessly persists on knocking at the door and is *finally* answered by the reluctant host, *how much more* will God be willing to answer our persistent prayers? Why should we pray? Because God will answer!

The second lesson in prayer is that parents would never think of giving their child a harmful gift like a poisonous snake or a scorpion.

If this is so, again, *how much more* would God desire to give only good gifts to us, His children! The good gifts that Jesus refers to are the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Those are what we are to pray for.

This is so important... because while Christ himself encourages us to persevere in asking for things that we know to be absolutely good, be they prayers for ourselves or for others, it may seem that God is not answering or we are not getting the answer we want. The problem then is either with God or with us or what we are praying for.

But if we are just as persistent in our prayers, especially for the Gifts of the Spirit, then the way that God answers our prayers (which He always does) will free us from all anxiety through the fruits of the Holy Spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity.

And these qualities and attitudes will then allow us to faithfully follow the path of authentic discipleship that we have heard about over these last few weeks: Love of God and neighbor, being attentive to God's Word and perseverance in prayer.