



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Genesis 18:20-33
Second Reading Colossians 2:6-15
Gospel Luke 11:1-13

A classmate of mine in seminary told about his encounter with a New York rabbi. While driving together to some ecumenical event in New Jersey, the two had occasion to cross the George Washington Bridge and approached the toll booth. "Go to the manual booth- the one with the attendant," instructed the rabbi. "Why?" asked my friend, "it takes longer." "Yes," answered the rabbi, "but in this life you should never avoid any opportunity to engage another person."

One of the little skills I have developed over the last seven years of living in Asia is that of bargaining. It most certainly didn't come naturally: and this seems to be the case with many Americans getting used to living abroad. The idea of asking for a lower price seems a bit like begging to many of us, and suggesting that one pay something lower than the "official" stated price, as opposed to shopping around for bargains, sounds almost dishonest. What I have learned, however, is that bargaining here in Asia, or for that matter in the Middle East, Mexico and indeed great chunks of the world, is an opportunity for social interaction.

This is where Americans get it *wrong*- they approach bargaining with the preconception that the seller is trying to get one over on the buyer- cheating, if you

will. That's rarely the case, and *thinking* that it is will only make the exchange *hostile*, not enjoyable. In fact, the *first price* stated by the seller in the market or the souq or the tiangue is meant as an *engagement*- it is the introduction to an enjoyable little two-step that will eventually end up in pleasant, mutual compromise-less money than first stated, and more than the first counter-offer. Done with smiles and laughter, it is a great way to make interpersonal contact with people. Yes, it takes a bit of gumption to do it without embarrassment, but to avoid it is to cheat oneself out of human interaction and a lot of the good will that comes from it.

Perhaps this seems a rather unorthodox way of introducing a sermon about prayer, but this is what today's Scriptures tell me about what prayer really is. It is a statement about a relationship.

Today's first reading from Genesis is perhaps the Bible's most famous example of bargaining. Unless this exchange is experienced in a similar way as bargaining in the tiangue, we will be forced to see God as a very arbitrary Being whose mind can be changed by some tricky fast-talk. This is an uncomfortable passage for those who like fixed prices and a Supreme Being that is unmovable and impassive. It is almost impossible for those who want God to be like an American or a Brit.

What we instead are given is an exchange with a man of the ancient Near East who is doing what he would do with a friend- bargaining. His counter-offers are meant not to cheat God. The story portrays God as a partner- one involved in a friendly exchange that expresses the kind of relationship He has with Abraham- one based on the idea of a Covenant between God and this one, symbolic human. Of course, today's passage doesn't give the final scene of the story. As we leave Abraham, he is rather relieved and pleased with himself that he has bargained down the price of Sodom to ten good men. In the end, unfortunately, the deal falls through and Sodom is destroyed. But the principle of negotiation with God remains as the main point of the Old Testament story. (We will experience that again later this year at our performance of "Fiddler on the Roof": the main character feels justified in having one-on-one heartfelt talks- and complaints- with God all the time!)

When, in today's Gospel, Jesus' disciples ask him how to pray, he teaches them what we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer. It is good that we hear the familiar words in a more precise translation than the polished version we will recite later in today's service because it helps us to see an important point. Jesus isn't giving his friends a liturgical text to recite on high holy occasions, but rather the bare outline of what needs to be included in all of our prayers.

This "outline" is important for many reasons, but one of them is the kind of relationship it seems to describe between the pray-er and the "pray-ee". The first two petitions are in the subjunctive tense: "*may* your name be held holy" and "*may* your kingdom come." That's nice and polite. The rest of the prayer is down-right demanding and has a series of commands: "give!", "forgive!", "do not put us to the test!". Have you ever thought about how *presumptuous* that is- telling God what to do like that? Shouldn't be we groveling a bit more- begging and pleading? Or, on the other hand, couldn't we just leave it at the phrase that other versions of the prayer, but not Luke's, include: "your will be done"?

But the Lord's Prayer, and indeed offering *any* prayer to God, is a bit more like the act of bargaining in the market: it something of a ritual that establishes the relationship between two persons. The initial demand may seem far too hard and costly to accept, even if it might represent something God approves of. And the counter-offer- asking for mercy and nourishment and protection- this is not meant to suggest that God is trying to cheat us, or that he is simply demanding too much. But it is stating that we recognize a relationship between us- that we are called upon to stand in his presence and dare to negotiate. This is the insight we have inherited from our spiritual forebears, the Jews. It is the relationship that was clarified and perfected in the person and the witness of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It allows us to dare to presume to say such things as, "...Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Is that true? Very, very rarely. But at least it tells God that we are aware of the rules- the principle that allows us to make these presumptions on his mercy and his forgiveness. And it says that we will continue to try to live up to this relationship, this Covenant, by continuing to engage God in the two-step dance we call prayer- saying what really doesn't need to be said to a God who already

knows, but saying it anyway because it reinforces our awareness of the relationship we have.

Does God really need our prayers? Of course not. Does God really need to *hear* our prayers? Absolutely. It establishes *who we are* together, here in the marketplace of life, daring to be presumptuous in speaking to God like this because of the Covenant we have: brave enough to take God at his word and engage him as another Person...in other words, brave enough to *pray*.