

Weekly Reading – Tuesday, July 19, 2010

We're looking now at the lessons for Sunday, July 25, 2010, which is the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 12. As has been true for most of this Ordinary Time, I will opt for the typological Old Testament which serves to accent the theme of persistence in the gospel reading.

Genesis 18: 20 - 32

This is such a great story, Abraham bargaining with God on behalf of the town of Sodom. Abraham's question is on behalf of the innocent and just. "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" How can a just God do such a thing? Of course, by the end it is not the innocent or just who perish because of the wicked, but the just who save the wicked and the city. They are the original "saving remnant." Abraham begins the bidding at 50, "Suppose there are fifty righteous in the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous in it?" By the end of the scene, Abraham has God down to 10. There are a couple of obvious themes, as well as questions. One theme is the role of the intercessor, going before God on behalf of the people, a priestly role. Another is persistence. Abraham keeps at it. All this raises questions: can we indeed bargain with God? Does God bargain with us? As you wrestle with such questions, here's a pastoral observation: often congregations are like a small town, a community of the just and unjust, the wise and the foolish. In all the congregations I've known, there seems to be a saving remnant of genuine saints, spiritually mature, wise and truly decent, hearts open and minds alert. Generally these folks are not the same as those who run the joint (on paper), nor do they get, or wish to get, a lot of time in the spotlight. But they are the faithful whose righteousness covers the rest of us and keeps the thing, that is the church, going, often in spite of itself.

Colossians 2: 6 - 15 (16 - 19)

Again, the overall theme and concern of this letter is to reassure the Colossians of the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ Jesus. He is not simply one divine figure among others. He is the first-born of all creation, the image of the invisible God (1: 15). Not only is Christ singular and sufficient, but what has happened to the Colossians by virtue of Christ and their faith in him is singular and definitive. "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority." (2: 9 -10). What's at stake here is, does this Christian thing really matter? Does it make a decisive difference? Paul makes his answer plain in his interpretation of baptism. "When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." (2: 12). Hard to be more definitive than that. You have died. You have been raised to new life. Sometimes it seems that our churches are organized to say precisely the opposite: "No, this doesn't matter much; don't take it too seriously." In the optional verses Paul extends his argument in a way that has some similarities to his concerns in Galatians. It's not about a bunch of religious

clap-trap or all the stuff you have to do to show how spiritual you are. "Hold fast," says Paul, "to the head," which means "hold fast to Christ."

Luke 11: 1 - 13

After the visit to Martha and Mary's home and Jesus' benediction on Mary who listens for the word of the Lord, teaching on prayer is a natural next step. But this teaching on prayer is given a Lucan twist. The emphasis falls on persistence, in prayer and in faith. Luke's distinctive note becomes clear if you compare it to the parallel text in Matthew, Matthew 6: 9 and following. There Matthew's context is integrity and lack of show. Here, in Luke, its about persistence. Immediately after giving the Lord's Prayer, there is a parable about the persistent friend, seeking food for unexpected company. The punch line is verse 8, "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs." Moreover, the theme is amplified in the following verses about "Ask," "Seek," and "Knock." Faith here is not passive, but active, even aggressive. Faith is not quiet but noisy. Faith is not quiet waiting, but assertive asking, seeking and knocking. We sometimes do reduce faith to a quiet, gentle trust and forget this other dimension, this other aspect. There is a time to Knock, to Seek, to Ask.