

**Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(July 25, 2010)**

Striking a Bargain

Recently I read a commentary on Luke's Gospel which gives a very interesting spin on today's Gospel passage. The author asks the question: in Jesus' parable about the friend who begs bread from his neighbor at midnight really about persistence which is the way it has traditionally been interpreted. In other words: keep pestering God and eventually God will get tired of the nagging and give you what you want, like the man in the parable. But the author suggests that something else might be going on here.

To think fresh thoughts about this story, he says, it helps to know five bits of background information. First, in the ancient Near East it was taken for granted that one offered a meal to a visiting traveler, even to a stranger – as we heard last week with Abraham and his three visitors. Second, bread was essential to any meal in that culture; grain in the form of bread was a major part of the diet, and it also served as a utensil; pieces were used to dip into the common serving bowls. Third, since baking was done out of doors in an oven shared by several families, it was a kind of community experience, and everyone knew who had baked bread on a given day. Fourth, the reputation of a village for hospitality was a matter of community honor, so that if the man who came begging bread at midnight could not offer any to his guest, the whole town's reputation might suffer. And fifth, there is a fascinating question about the proper translation of the word usually rendered as persistence,

Now remember: Jesus' parables always have an element of surprise to the people who hear them, something that makes them sit up and take notice. It's hard for us to realize this from our perspective and from our familiarity with these stories. So what is the element of surprise here? It's when the man inside says, "Leave me alone. The door is shut now and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up to look after your needs." The reaction from Jesus' hearers would be outrage. "That's ridiculous," they would say. No one would refuse the duties of hospitality that way and

incidentally risk the reputation of the whole town. It just wasn't done.

Now, what about that word that's usually translated persistence? Pardon me if I seem to get a bit technical here, but I'm going to talk about the Greek text, because it often helps to understand what is really going on by consulting the original. The fact is that in the Greek text that word could refer either to the man begging for bread or to the one already in bed with his family. Translators have usually made it refer to the one begging and so the moral of the story has always been: pray persistently with perseverance, never give up, and God will eventually hear your prayer and in some way answer it. Now I suspect that there may be a few of you that have in fact prayed persistently and nonetheless feel that God has not heard you or answered your prayers. Yes? Well, our author suggests another interpretation which in fact makes much more sense. The word in question literally means "avoidance of shame." If we take it as referring to the man in bed it should be translated something like this: "Yet because of his avoidance of shame, or in order to avoid shame, he will get up and give him whatever he needs." And in fact that fits better with what Jesus implies in the questions that follow the parable. Even if the guy next door is a grouch you know he will come through with the bread to avoid dishonoring his own and the village's reputation for hospitality. With this interpretation the point of the parable is not persistence but assurance. The man comes begging for bread in the middle of the night because he knows, for sure, that his neighbor will help him. And that's the way Jesus says we should pray, with assurance, with certainty that God hears us and in God's own way we will be answered.

I'm reminded of the story of the little boy who prayed to God that he would receive a bicycle for his birthday. When the great day came around there was no bike, and so a "wise" adult said to the little boy, "I guess God didn't hear your prayer." The child replied, "Oh yes, God heard me. But he said no." Out of the mouths of babes!

Now in the light of what I have said about hospitality in Near Eastern culture, I feel I must say something about that first reading and not so much about that homely little dialogue between Abraham and God in which Abraham, fully assured that God will listen, does not hesitate to bargain to save as many people as possible in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

What I want to point out however is the misuse of this passage to bash gay people and to demonize unjustly a whole segment of our society. Even the Catholic Church is not innocent in this regard.

The scripture scholars are telling us today that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not specifically homosexual activity, although illicit sexual activity both homosexual and heterosexual was apparently involved in the life of these two cities. The sin was the violation of the duties of hospitality. In the ancient Near East, again, hospitality was one of the most important virtues. It was given much more attention than anything that had to do with sex and sexuality. Sexual sins, again, both homosexual and heterosexual, are condemned quite strongly in other parts of the Old Testament. But they are never as serious as sins against hospitality. So when you hear certain “religious” people trying to use this text to condemn gay people and consign them to outer darkness, well, take it with several large grains of salt. I try not to judge these people. Let’s hope they are sincere. But the fact is they are mistaken.

There is something very human about today’s scriptures. God is certainly not presented with an aura of otherness or aloofness. God’s exchange with Abraham is lively and very down to earth – even humorous. This dimension of our faith should not be overlooked. The transcendence of God is important for faith, for liturgy, and for forming Christian conscience. But there is also a charm about inspired human speech about God. That too is part of the message. Jesus’ homespun Palestinian parables really don’t lend themselves to being sanitized. We don’t serve religion well in identifying it solely with spotless sanctuaries and shining marble, with beautiful floral arrangements and flowing vestments – as important as these may be. A crying baby, a hearty laugh, a good round of applause – even in church – are an integral part of the mix of faith.

Faith is not just about a world beyond. Much, maybe even most, of it is about living in the here and now. And we do that as people, as men and women, as citizens of a nation, as part of a city or region. God did not hesitate to plunge into the human scene. And in so doing God accepted limits. In becoming flesh, God laughed, cried, told interesting stories, and mixed with both men and women quite freely. In today’s scriptures, God lets Abraham strike a good bargain. Jesus tells us that his Father can be

moved, not so much by persistence, but by confident, assured prayer – fascinating insights into God, but also very real dimensions of faith.