

Come, Holy Spirit, and make these words Your word, that our hearts may become your heart. Amen.

Have you ever haggled in a market? I've witnessed it in a few places. The idea is, you're supposed to bargain; It's bad manners to pay the stated price. But it always made me uncomfortable – even as a child I was aware of income and power inequalities, the irony of wealthy Westerners trying to talk much poorer merchants down in price made me a little queasy.

We see market haggling on steroids in our story from Genesis. This scene of Abraham and God negotiating over the fate of the residents of wicked Sodom is one of the funniest stories in the Bible. Flattery, guilt-tripping, appeal to reputation, gradually stepped up demands... Abraham offers is great illustration of chutzpah.

Now, did God and Abraham really talk like this? Was someone taking notes? Or did Abraham experience his prayer encounter with God this way, and tell the story so well that it was repeated around nomadic camp fires for generations? Does it matter? The fact that the people of God decided to *tell* it, and then *write* it, and then *include* it in Scripture, means that it spoke to them about who God was and is, how we are invited to be in relationship with this Living God, a real and sometimes messy relationship.

Jesus reveals that relationship in human terms too – as a conversation with your Father in heaven, one who is holy and Other, yes, but whom you address as Abba, Daddy; one who loves you and desires the best for you. That's how Jesus taught us to pray to God. In relationship.

Some people think prayer is something we do when we need something. We ask politely, like submitting a request to corporate headquarters. And when our prayer is not answered the way we wanted, we go away –
Sometimes we say, "Oh well, it wasn't God's will."
Or, "Oh well, who said God answered prayer anyway?"
Or, "Oh well, who said God exists?"

What's the point of believing in God if it doesn't get us anything?
But what kind of relationship is only based on what we can get?

Jesus came to invite us into a relationship with His Father in heaven. Prayer is the way we enter that relationship, that door that always opens to us. So when his disciples said, “Teach us to pray,” he started with the basics. “Who are you talking to? Your abba/amma in heaven. Your father/mother who loves you, but isn’t like you – who is holy beyond measure. your creator who loves you, who exists in a realm where all things are possible. And we pray, “Let that realm come here into this one.” Your kingdom come.

We ask this loving mother/father to give us what we need for today. Not for this year, just what we need to sustain us, today. And in the embrace of this loving relationship with One who knows us, we can be real, and honest about our sins and receive God’s forgiveness, which is always waiting for us. And out of gratitude and humility that comes with being forgiven, we can forgive those who have hurt or wounded or offended us. And ask God to defend us in the trials that come our way in this broken world, be they misfortunes or spiritual attack.

That’s it. So simple and right, that we’re still saying that prayer weekly, even daily. But Jesus didn’t stop there. He knew human nature better than anyone. He knew how mistrustful we can be, how much we’d rather take what we need than be dependent upon someone else to give it to us. So he told two stories about fathers – in this case, fathers who are nothing like Our Father who art in Heaven... yet even in their humanness approach generosity. How much more, He says, will your father in heaven give good things to his children.

That Jesus needed to tell those stories shows how far the people of God had drifted from the intimate relationship we were created for. How far they had come from the relationship Abraham had with God, or Moses, or David, who could argue and rail at God, and offer praises. By Jesus’ time, worship of God had become a matter of keeping stringent, detailed rules. It less a matter of love, more of law. In his parable of the fathers, Jesus invites us to ask, to seek, to knock – and to expect that we will receive, we will find, the door will be opened.

Abraham doesn’t let up in his asking, seeking, knocking. In his case, he does get what he asks.

But more than winning a negotiation, Abraham receives a deeper fullness of relationship with God, this God whom he persists in trusting though God's promises often look baffling, even impossible. Abraham trusts because he's in the relationship, not because of what he receives.

Jesus doesn't promise that when we pray we will receive get what we want. Jesus invites us to go beyond what we want, into trusting in God's presence. When we ask, seek, knock it's not like a wish list, a wedding registry – it's more like a wedding night, a mutual giving and receiving in love. Jesus promises that the Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. The Holy Spirit is the way we experience the presence and power and peace and the fullness of God.

You know how, after you've spent with a really good friend, a happy glow lasts? That's what happens when we receive the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit abides with us.

The Holy Spirit activates the gifts she gives, so we can participate in God's mission. The Holy Spirit aligns our decision-making, our movements, our relationships with God's dreams for us.

When we're aware of God's Spirit alive in us, we begin to be transformed; other people see in us things like *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness*.

And the Holy Spirit gives us the power of God, the power that made the universe, so that we can become agents of transformation for others.

I've been toying with mission statements for Christ Church – my current favorite is, "God is in the business of transformation. We get to help."

In the Gospels, do we see Jesus blessed with riches, with power, with glory?

No, we see him moving from place to place, dependent upon the generosity of others. We see him continually giving away earthly power, to the point of dying a humiliating death.

And we also see him wielding supernatural power over diseases, despair, death, over oppressive social structures, over injustice and misfortune.

He's still doing that, only now through us.

The one undeniable promise of God, after eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ, is his presence with us here and now through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And that gifts makes possible everything. Everything we want to be.

We are promised God's peace through the Holy Spirit –

from a place of peace, we often see solutions more clearly.

We are promised God's joy through the Holy Spirit –

from a place of joy we are more apt to anticipate good outcomes.

That can make a huge difference when we're sick or in conflict.

We are promised God's love through the Holy Spirit –

from a place of love, the security of an eternal relationship with God,

we can be more loving to ourselves and to those around us,

which makes all our relationships smoother.

Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these other things will come to you too.

To pray in relationship is to focus on God, not what we're praying about.

Imagine a hopscotch frame on the sidewalk with three boxes.

You are in the center box. Your problems, needs, wants are here, and God is here.

Where are you looking? If we focus on our problems, God is behind us –

still in the picture, but we're not facing his power and love and goodness.

If we turn and focus on God, our problems are behind us; God can still see them.

We can just keep asking God's power to flow through us to those difficulties,
and entrust them to him.

The same goes for the things we think we need, or want so badly.

When we focus on them, God is behind us.

When we focus on God, they are behind us – and often we receive them anyway.

But we focus our wanting on God,

becoming hungry for more of God's life, thirsty for more of God's Spirit.

Should we bother praying about those things we want or feel we need?

Of course. A loving parent wants to hear what their children are worried about,

even when they know they cannot give a pony or produce a friend.

God wants us to speak what's going on with us, and then to release those needs

and wants and anxieties to him,

because God wants to bless our socks off with one gift we cannot give ourselves,

the power and love and peace of the Holy Spirit flowing through our lives.

How much more does God want to bless us, and the world through us?

More than we can ever ask or imagine.

Amen.

Luke 11:1-13

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation." Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' "Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. "So I say to you: **Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.** For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"**

Genesis 18:20-33

Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing--to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it." Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it." When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.