

A young minister was asked to say prayers at a gravesite service. He was told that it was for a homeless person who was being buried in a little country cemetery, just newly opened by the county, about ten miles from his church. The minister got lost on the way there, and when he finally arrived, he saw a backhoe with three or four workers eating lunch near the half-filled hole, but there was no funeral director in sight. He knew he was really late and he was totally embarrassed. So he apologized profusely to the workers, stepped up to the graveside and started to pray. The workers joined in with the Amens and Alleluias and Praise the Lord. The young minister preached enthusiastically for quite a while from several Scripture passages. Finally he closed his Bible and went back to his car. As he neared the car, he heard one of the workers say: “I ain’t never seen anything like that before, and I’ve been putting in septic tanks for 20 years.”

We can pray anytime or anywhere, of course, and I expect that septic tank will work perfectly for the next 50 years! Each of today’s readings are about prayer. Jesus tells us to be persistent: Ask and you will receive, he says.

Abraham in today’s first reading was certainly that—persistent. He was also a world-class bargainer—could have been a great union negotiator. He just never gives up or gives in. Of course, he has a reason. In this reading he is trying to save the lives of his nephew Lot and his family. When the Lord mentions that he intends to see if Sodom and Gomorrah *deserve* the destruction that others were demanding, Abraham immediately begins to bargain for Lot’s rescue.

The first thing he did was the strategy of any good bargainer—he appealed to the goodwill of his opponent: Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty?... Should not the judge

of the world act with justice?” He questions the integrity of the other, but this time the other happens to be God.

But the Lord agrees with Abraham and promises to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for fifty just people. But Abraham suspects that the number of righteous people is far less than fifty, so he goes to work, whittling the Lord down to agree to spare the cities if only ten just people can be found. So in the end it appears that Abraham has won the bargain.

This is often the way with us in prayer, isn't it? After all our bargaining with God, it appears that we have gotten what we asked for—that we have won and God, in a sense, has been overwhelmed by our persistence. I guess we have the same blindness as Abraham. Although the reading today ends with the apparent victory of Abraham, the story goes on to tell of both the salvation of Lot *and* the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah because, in fact, there were not even ten just people in the two towns.

When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, they too are making a bargain with him. The bargain is that if they are *taught* to pray, they *will* pray. And when Jesus answers, he teaches them a prayer filled with bargains: “Hallowed be your name... Your kingdom come... Give us today our daily bread...” And the toughest one of all: “Forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us.”

It is a prayer we learn as children, and we adults have probably recited thousands of times. But familiar as it is, this prayer is really demanding. Why? One answer comes in Paul's letter to the Colossians: It is because of the great bargain Jesus made with the Father for us: “He cancelled the bond that stood against us with all its claims, snatching it up and nailing it to a cross.” Jesus Christ wagered his life for ours—the bargain exchanged his death for our life.

That's what all this bargaining is about—that we, like Abraham and Jesus, would be willing to stand and plead for someone else, that we would be willing to intercede for the happiness, safety, preservation, good fortune, or escape from death of another human being.

The power of intercessory prayer—“bargaining” to a certain degree—takes a great deal of persistence, and maybe it will succeed for no other reason than the one given in this gospel passage—to shut up the petitioner. But Jesus doesn't say there's anything wrong with that. It operates in all of us, the human element protruding. But if that's the reason why in the end someone gets fed or sheltered or paid justly or freed from oppression or has their marriage saved, then the haggling has been well worth it.

Jesus promises answers, results, but he says that we have to be willing to ask, to seek and to knock. We have to be willing to put ourselves into that pleading position and then accept the answer that is given. The answer may not be what we expected; it may be *more* than we expected. But we have to believe in the love and mercy and compassion of God, the same God who listened to Abraham, saved Lot, raised Jesus, and created us to live with him forever in heaven, and whose will for us will always be better than our will for ourselves!