

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)

July 28, 2019

Genesis 18:20–32 • Colossians 2:12–14 • Luke 11:1–13

I.

I spent ten days hiking in Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks, in Wyoming, with a priest-friend of mine.

On our first day, about three hours into our hike, something memorable happened.

According to protocol in those parts, we were making noise as we went, in order to alert wildlife to our presence.

Not far from the end of the hike, we heard some rustling of branches.

About twenty yards away, just off the trail, a grizzly bear looked up at us.

As you might imagine, I was absolutely petrified.

We managed to stay calm and backed away slowly, as you're supposed to do in the case of an encounter with a bear.

We put as much distance as we could between ourselves and the bear, which luckily didn't follow us.

We had to return because otherwise it would have been a three-hour detour.

Happily, the animal was gone when we returned to the spot twenty minutes later.

One adventure from my vacation.

II.

Believe it or not, we had another bear encounter two days later—this time a mother and her two cubs, and luckily park rangers were there—but otherwise things were calm.

As often happens on these long hikes, you gain perspective: about life in general, and about your life in particular.

What is life about?

What's the meaning of what I try to do, day in and day out?

On Sunday, as we were hiking Signal Mountain in the Grand Tetons, my priest-friend and I got to talking.

I was saying: the most important thing we can do as priests, and the biggest challenge the Church faces, is to help Catholics develop a personal relationship with God.

That sets the tempo for everything else that follows: regular reception of the sacraments, striving for moral excellence, religious education, and a commitment to supporting the Church spiritually and financially.

Without a personal relationship with God, faith is a kind of limp theory.

III.

Today's Gospel features the Our Father—the version found in the Gospel according to Luke.

This text is more than a prayer; it expresses an entire relationship with God.

The version in Luke is shorter than the one we're used to saying, which is found in the Gospel according to Matthew.

That text begins, "Our Father."

We address God as Father; we relate to him as sons and daughters by virtue of our Baptism.

And we say, "*Our* Father," because it's never just a matter of "me and God."

Our relationship with God is personal but not private; to be in a relationship with God is to be in a relationship with all others, which implies the Church.

This filial relationship with God
—being his son or daughter—
means that there is dependence, love, and obedience, as on the human level.

It also means that there is growth and maturity in the relationship.

As we get older, we relate to our parents differently than when we're young.

The same is meant to hold in our relationship with God.

So when the disciples ask Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,”
and he instructs them, “When you pray, say,”
Christ is showing them how to relate to God.

Learning to pray is about developing a relationship with God,
not just uttering words.

The parables that accompany the Our Father explain how to deepen that friendship.

There is a need for constancy and persistence.

And there is a need to understand how our heavenly Father relates to us:

“What father among you would hand his son a snake if he asks for a fish? ...
If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children,
how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit
to those who ask him?”

Prayer doesn't change God; it changes us.

So prayer is about a relationship with God:
learning to accept his gifts,
realizing that, ultimately, we seek God's help to carry out his will.

“Thy will be done. ...
Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

The simplicity and directness of the Our Father is an indication
that we are meant to have a direct relationship with God.

The need for persistence—in the parable, and in the example of Abraham in the First Reading—indicates familiarity and trust in God.

Familiarity and trust only develop with time—with time spent with God.

So, here is my encouragement:
let's each of us spend dedicated, quality time with God each day.

Of course, prayer can take different forms.

The most important thing is to spend time with God,
so that he is our focus.

Each person is capable of finding at least five such minutes;
so, let's all start with at least that.

A final thought, from the great St. Augustine (354–430 AD),
who lived in the 300s and 400s, and who a bishop in North Africa (today Algeria):

“Why [God] should ask us to pray,
when he knows what we need before we ask him...
our Lord and God does not want to know what we want
(for he cannot fail to know it)
but wants us rather to exercise our desire through our prayers,
so that we may be able to receive what he is preparing to give us.
His gift is very great indeed, but our capacity is too small and limited to receive it.
That is why we are told: *Enlarge your desires...*
The deeper our faith, the stronger our hope, that greater our desire,
the larger will be our capacity to receive that gift, which is very great indeed.”

The gift is God himself:
union with him in presence,
and a determination to carry out his will.