As I reflected on our reading from Genesis I found myself wondering a few things like: Did Abraham really change God’s mind about how he was going to deal with the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah? Did Abraham really know more about what God should be like than God? And why did God allow Abraham to challenge him like that?

As I pondered these things I found myself thinking about my experience as a camp counselor in training many years ago. The man who was leading this training had been working with youth camps for many years, and very effectively. He was much loved and respected. But some of us, who were still youth ourselves, were a bit insecure about being camp counselors because we knew from our own experience that young people like to assert their independence. And it is not always easy to get them to participate in planned activities and to abide by a particular code of conduct. So we asked the man who was leading our training about this. How do you get the youth who come to camp to do what they are supposed to do?

I’ve never forgotten his answer. He said that you do it by involving the youth in the planning process and leading them in such a way that they are invested in it. Even if you know how things should be done, it’s important to guide the young people you are working with in such a way that they come to that same conclusion for themselves. And sometimes the best way to do this is to propose something that is so obviously wrong that those you’re working with will argue strongly for what is right. And those of us who put his words into practice found that it often worked pretty well.

I think I remembered this because this seems to be what God was doing with Abraham in our reading from Genesis today. He began by telling him how he was planning to deal with the sins of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah – that is by utterly destroying those places. He did this knowing full well that Abraham would have a problem with that. How did God know Abraham would have a problem with it? Because his nephew Lot lived in Sodom. Because even though Lot could be a royal pain at times, Abraham loved him and thought that God should love him too. After all, he’s the one who brought him into being. While it was true that Abraham was peeved by what his nephew and members of his family had done from time to time, he had never gotten to the point where he thought that the best thing to do was to simply kill them all. So, shouldn’t God be able to put up with a lot more – without ever getting to the point of thinking that simply wiping people out was the best thing to do?

Of course, God knew Abraham well enough to know how his friend would respond to what he said he was planning to do to Sodom and Gomorrah. And Abraham didn’t disappoint. He entered into a conversation with God in which he tried to convince God that what he was planning to do wasn’t right. He began a bit tentatively to be sure, “Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? What if there are fifty innocent people in the city? Will you destroy the whole place rather than to spare it for the sake of the fifty?” Of course, the question behind this question was: “If you really want people to believe that you are a good and just God, don’t you think you should act that way? Are you really going to allow wickedness to shape the future rather than goodness? Are you going to allow evil to undermine your good purposes for your people?”

I believe that God must have been pleased by this questioning. And he played along with it quite masterfully. “OK, if there are fifty innocent people, I’ll spare the whole place,” God responded. Then the haggling began. It was hilarious, really. Finally, Abraham got God down to ten. And I have no doubt that God was delighted by the way things went. You see, by drawing Abraham into this conversation,
God was actually helping the father of faith come to clarity about something that would be of enduring significance for all God’s people.

What Abraham came to see clearly is this: For God, justice is not a matter of destroying those people who have gone bad in some way. Justice is about making things right. And simply destroying people doesn’t do that. In fact, to do such a thing would make the rendering of justice impossible. Things could never be made right. So the way of destruction cannot be the way of God. It is the way of evil, whose constant intention is to keep things from ever being made right. The way of evil is the way of destruction. And having given themselves fully over to evil, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah eventually found this out. But God’s way is to make things right by doing what is good, by doing everything possible to enable people to see that good is better than evil, and that the best life possible is a life lived in communion with him. So, in effect, Abraham was telling God to act like the God he knew he was.

How did Abraham know that this is what God is like? By spending time with him -- in thought and in prayer. From the time he had first encountered God, God had always been part of his life. And as with anyone else, the more time he spent with God the better he got to know him. That’s why he could push God to be the God he had come to know – to be God-self. In fact, he had to push God to be the God he had gotten to know because Abraham loved him and had built his whole life around him. And in the process, what he wanted had come more and more into sync with what God wanted. That’s the way it works.

Now I think this story about Abraham’s conversation with God really helps us to understand Jesus’ teaching in today’s gospel on the importance of persistence in prayer. While it may seem at first that Jesus is saying in this gospel that if we just pray for something long enough we’ll get what we want -- this is not the case. That’s why before his teaching on asking, seeking, and knocking, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray – a praying that begins with the words, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.” In other words, “God, you are the good and holy one, please bring everyone and everything under your reign.”

Well, persistence in prayer is the way we bring ourselves under God’s reign. Like Abraham, the more we turn to God, the more we come to know what God is like – how good and loving God is – and the more we want things to be done according to his will. In other words, the more we come to know God, the more we come to want what God wants. And eventually this is what will shape all our praying. We will pray for things that are truly best for us and for everyone, because we know that this is what is most pleasing to the God we love.

This is what happens when we are persistent in prayer. The more time we spend with our good and loving God, the more we will come to desire the things that are pleasing to him. So this is what we will ask for. And this is what we’ll get.

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