Last week, we heard about three visitors whom Abraham received under the oaks of Mamre. Today, those same three visitors continue on to their destination, and Abraham goes out with them. We already know from last week that the three visitors are—somehow—God. As two of them go on to Sodom and Gomorrah, one stays behind and lets Abraham in on the LORD’s plan. “Should I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” God asks Themself. “No, for I have chosen him… to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice…” the people of the region have raised a “great outcry” against the Cities of the Plain for their sins, and God is headed there to execute justice the way all of Israel’s neighbors understood justice: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Evil behavior must have retribution, and evil people must be destroyed.

However, God has also chosen to include Abraham in this conversation, and it is Abraham who offers a different view of justice: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” he asks. He then proceeds to haggle with God, wondering if 50 righteous in the cities are enough to save them, then 45, 40, 30, and so on. I wonder if Abraham stops at 10 not because he feels he can’t press his luck any further, or that 10 is the bare minimum to prevent God’s justice, but because he’s made his point. He might have continued: “What about 5 righteous people? One righteous person? What about one person that is righteous most of the time? Part of the time? What about one person who is accidentally righteous twice a year?” but he doesn’t have to. With his negotiation, he has asked, “Is there any lower limit to God’s mercy?” and the answer is no: it is never just that the innocent should suffer for the guilty.

Abraham is successful in his bargaining not because he is shrewd or eloquent or because God likes him better than anyone else; he is successful because he knows who God is. He knows before he asks that God would not punish the righteous with the wicked. We read this story to learn again what Abraham knows: he knows who God is.

This is a story that never happened. It is not a historical fact. It is a theological examination of a much older story about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. These two cities were wiped out by something a very, very long time ago, and the common wisdom in the region was that they must have been destroyed by the judgment of the gods for their wickedness. When Israel included this legend in their own history, it didn’t sit any easier with them than it does with us, because it doesn’t fit with who they knew God to be. And so, to complete the story, they included this narrative in which Abraham—Israel’s ancestor—questions the common wisdom about divine justice. The story concludes that God is not capricious or vengeful in God’s justice, but merciful. That story fits better with the God they knew.

So, here’s a question for you: how did Israel—or Abraham—know who God was? Remember the first part of this story of the three visitors. At Mamre, they delivered to Abraham and Sarah a message of good news, a message of promise: that in due season, the LORD would return and the couple—even in their old age—would bear a son.

The whole story of Abraham throughout Genesis is one of God’s continual faithfulness. God chooses Abraham seemingly at random to be the father of many nations. God continues to keep that promise through doubt and hardship, and even through Abraham’s and Sarah’s unfaithfulness to that covenant. To Abraham—and to Israel—this kind of love and fidelity didn’t fit with the kind of God who would wantonly destroy the innocent along with the guilty. They knew from generations of experience who God was, and who God was not.

We get a similar message about prayer in St. Luke’s gospel. When the disciples ask Jesus, “Teach us to pray,” they may be asking, “Teach us how to make God listen to us,” or, “Teach us to be pleasing to God so God will favor us.” What Jesus offers instead is a reminder of who this God is. He reminds them that prayer is not an attempt to persuade or to manipulate God. Instead, prayer is asking God to be God: “Hallowed by your name. Your will be done. Forgive as you have taught us to forgive. Deliver us from evil, as you already have.” In teaching his disciples to pray, he’s inviting them to get to know God better.

And who is this God to whom we pray? What has this God already promised us? How has this God already faithfully kept those promises? Whenever we pray, we do so in the context of this relationship that God has with us and our parents and grandparents, all the way back to Abraham and Sarah. Whatever thanksgivings or praises or petitions we lift up, we lift them up to the One who has already written us into this story of faithfulness that stretches back to the very beginning, traces its way through exile and return, winds its way up the hill of Calvary and back down out of the sealed tomb, ever continuing on toward the promise of the healing of all creation.

When we pray, we are finding our place in that story of faithfulness. Prayer not only reminds us who God is, it also helps us figure out who we are. Our relationship with this faithful God informs our identities. When we voice prayers—whether to ask for healing or guidance, or to give thanks in the good times and lament in the bad—we are voicing our deepest feelings and our greatest desires. By naming those things, we allow them to become real, to admit to them. We reveal ourselves not only to God, but to our own selves.

And, just as in the haggling prayer of Abraham, we may be changed by the experience. While Abraham may have begun his negotiation with God in an attempt to save his nephew Lot, who lived in Sodom, by the end, I wonder if he had begun to feel a connection to *all* the people of the Cities of the Plain. Prayer is a journey of discovery, both of who God is and of who we are.

The foundation for Abraham’s boldness before God and for the prayer Jesus teaches us is the loving, intimate, faithful relationship that God has with us. That relationship changes and evolves over time; we go through hard times as well as good ones. We may not ever really know what to expect from prayer; whether God can or will do what we ask. Reading these stories, however, I begin to wonder if the answer to prayer is the most important part. I wonder if there is something about prayer itself—whether or not we receive anything we might experience as an “answer”—that is just as important.

According to Jesus’ parable, the greatest gift we can hope to receive is the Holy Spirit. When I read that, I think back to Peter’s experience at Cornelius’ house that we read several weeks ago. When Peter preached, he witnessed the Holy Spirit descending on Cornelius’ entire household, even before they had been baptized. When he recalled the story later, he said, “The Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as it had upon us at the beginning.” The gift of the Spirit on Pentecost was what transformed Peter and his fellow disciples into a community with a mission to share the good news about Jesus; but it also, now, connected him to these Gentiles that, just a day earlier, he would have called unclean. The Spirit allowed him to see himself in them, to truly understand what it means that God “shows no partiality.”

If this Spirit is what we receive when we pray, then I wonder if prayer isn’t meant to strengthen our connection to God and to our fellow people: carrying one another’s burdens, rejoicing in each other’s celebrations, and mourning each other’s losses. Because of this gift of God, our prayers become something beyond mere spoken words or tangled thoughts: they become what binds us together as community.

This is not because of what we pray, or who we are, or about us at all; instead, it is because of who God is. Because God is fundamentally a God of relationship—a Triune God even in relationship with Godself—through our prayers, God creates relationship and community among us, as well. Prayer—any prayer—reminds us of this simple truth.

Many years after Jesus’ disciple asked him how to pray, Martin Luther’s barber asked him the same question. This part of Luther’s response, I think, neatly captures the essence of prayer. He writes

“Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the Amen firmly. Never doubt that God in God’s mercy will surely hear you and say ‘yes’ to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, ‘Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.’ That is what Amen means.” (Luther, *A Practical Way to Pray*, 1533)