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Many years ago, a couple of teenagers I worked with were in a serious car accident. Soon after the accident, I heard a youth minister tell the young driver that if he prayed hard enough, his buddy would live. I was so angry with that minister that I could hardly speak. All I could think of was that if the other kid died, the driver would feel doubly guilty — first for the accident, secondly for not praying well enough. Happily, the young man recovered.

I could not fathom the minister's theology. Did he think of God like a game show host who awards prizes to the best performers? Did he believe we need a special formula to talk God into being nice or to think twice when God is inclined to be mean? Did he think God does the most for the people who have the holiest friends? Do we pray to tell God how to do our bidding?

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Genesis 18:20-32

Psalms 138

Colossians 2:12-14

Luke 11:1-13

To me, those ideas seemed blasphemous. I couldn't believe in a God who demands cajoling or groveling. Neither could I love a God who controls the timing of the accident, the death of babies and the suffering of war. A God like that attracts no tenderness and doesn't seem to respect our freedom. Is that the God to whom Jesus invites us to pray?

After Jesus taught his disciples his style of prayer — what we call the Lord's Prayer — he told them a parable that can be misinterpreted in various ways. Jesus told of a person, we'll call her Angie, who had no food and whose friend, Vlad, arrived hungry in the middle of the night. Angie's apathetic friend Sam always had extra bread, so she went knocking on his door, pestering him until he gave her bread just to get

some peace.

Jesus praises Angie's persistence and tells his disciples, "Ask and you shall receive."

One conventional interpretation of Jesus' teaching is that if we ask God enough, we will get what we want. But, in addition to the offensive implication that we care more about the hungry than God does, there are two tricks planted in the story.

The first is that Jesus does not say, "Learn to beg cleverly enough to get what you want." He says, "Ask, and God will give you the Holy Spirit."

Trick No. 2 is a bit subtler. Vlad the Hungry went to impoverished Angie in need of bread. When Angie shook Sam out of his lethargy, she helped him as she did Vlad. When Sam shared his excess, he moved the world one step toward justice; he became part of creating a better world for everyone, and to the extent that he found joy in that, he would continue to do it.

Angie the evangelizer succeeded in finding sustenance for the hungry and enticing a friend toward Gospel values.

This explains the first trick. Angie's effort to get bread for hungry Vlad can be understood as a creative response to the Spirit's grace and her effort to spread that grace. In this interpretation, God acts on our behalf through creative grace, inspiring advocates to awaken sleepers on behalf of the hungry.

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Our prayer for the coming of God's kingdom is ultimately a prayer of self-offering. God does not promise to rain down bread from heaven, but to empower us to share and to encourage others to do the same. In this vision, we are not relating to a faraway God who must be cajoled into caring and acting; we are communicating with the God who is as near as we are to ourselves, the God whose grace empowers us with the strength and creativity to collaborate with the divine plan.

Today's Gospel began with the disciples' request that Jesus teach them to pray. What was his theology of prayer?

First, we see that the Lord's Prayer can be summarized by any of its phrases, and most particularly by the one Luke saved for Jesus' prayer in the Garden: "Thy will be

done." When we pray like this, we make ourselves totally available to God's grace working in and through us. When we understand prayer as a union of our will with God's, we are praying, as our eucharistic prayer says, "Through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, in the union of the Holy Spirit."

When we pray with and in and through Christ, we come to know God's presence with and among us in everything. God may not keep us from all harm, but because God's love is expressed in the Spirit and through others, we will never face harm alone.

When we allow Christ to teach us to pray, we stop asking God to do our bidding and join Christ in doing everything we can for the coming of God's kingdom.

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