

17th Sunday Ordinary Time
July 25, 2010
Fr. Tom Elliott

Relationship and Interpretation

Genesis 18:20-32
Psalm 138
Colossians 2:12-14
Luke 11:1-13

Our understanding of other people is the foundation for how we interpret their words and actions. For example, we can receive identical e-mails from two different people—our best friend and our worst enemy—and we will interpret and understand those e-mails in two completely different ways. Our interpretation of a text, e-mail, conversation or action is based on our *relationship* with the person who sent it.

The Bible is the history of the Israelites' ever-deepening relationship with God. It is not meant to give us the perfect picture of God, but rather, it gives us the Israelites' changing relationship with God, and their subsequent changing interpretation of God's actions. For example, at the beginning of the Israelites' relationship with God, they didn't know Him very well. They definitely did not understand their relationship with God as something intimate; therefore, they interpreted the events in the world as coming from a wrathful, vengeful God. Our first reading today is a good example of this development. The story is not meant to be a mathematical formula about God's wrath, but rather, it is meant to show the Israelites' deepening understanding of God's generous mercy.

At the beginning of the story in Genesis chapter eighteen, Abraham appeals to God for mercy upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham's assumption seems to be that God is vengeful and will wipe out all of the people in Sodom and Gomorrah, whether they are righteous or sinful. As the story develops, so does Abraham's understanding of God's mercy and love. God was willing to overlook the sins of thousands because of the righteousness of a few. This deepening understanding of God continued throughout the history of the Jews until the birth of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself offers to us the perfect image of God.

In our Gospel reading today the Apostles ask Jesus to teach them to pray. The beginning of His prayer, and the parables that follow it, give us a deep glimpse into the essence of God. First, Jesus' prayer begins with "Father." That is how Jesus asked us to address God. In the Old Testament, the Israelites sometimes used the word "father" for God, but not so much as a term of intimacy as a term of progeny. God is Creator, therefore He is the Father of all creation. Jesus used the word "Father" in a much more intimate way, however, and the parables that follow His prayer help to explain that intimacy.

A parable is a story that teaches a lesson. The word, "parable," literally means "to lay alongside." Therefore, a parable can teach a lesson in one of two ways—either through similarities or through contrast. Jesus is using the latter method in the parables in today's Gospel. He is explaining that God the Father intimately loves us and cares for us. He is not a God that we have to extract gifts from through persistent begging, nor does He desire to give us bad or dangerous gifts. God the Father is more than just the Creator then; He has an intimate, familial relationship with us; He loves us. It is not easy for people to grasp this awesome reality.

As Jesus went through Israel preaching about the Father's love, He met a lot of resistance. Many Jews did not like the intimacy with which Jesus spoke about His relationship

with God. In fact, they accused Him of blasphemy and tried to have Him killed.¹ Sometimes, you and I have a hard time accepting the intimacy of God's love, too. To the extent that our understanding of God is immature, our interpretation of the events in our lives and in the world will be immature.

One morning before Mass, I walked up behind a girl who was waiting to walk into church. I tapped her on the shoulder to get her attention. She thought it was her brother doing it, and became annoyed, crossing her arms and refusing to turn around. I tapped again and she spun around, ready to unleash her venom on her annoying brother. Then she realized it was me and her entire attitude changed. Understanding who was tapping on her shoulder changed her interpretation of the action from annoying to engaging. In a similar way, our understanding of God is the foundation for our interpretation of His actions in our lives.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ During your prayer time, picture God. What is He like? What is your primary image of God? How does this image shape your interpretation of the events in your life?

- ✚ Read John 14:1-12 and meditate on Jesus' words about the Father.

¹ John 10:30-38;