

Sermon 07-25-10 Genesis 18:20-32

Rev. Mark E. Sloss

Then the Lord said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! 21 I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know." 22 So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. 23 Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" 26 And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." 27 Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. 28 Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." 29 Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." 30 Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." 31 He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." 32 Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." --

I've long been a fan of Gary Larson, the Far Side Cartoonist, and his unique twisted form of one-frame humor. I recall one particular cartoon in which he depicted God sitting in front of a computer with his finger poised over a button on the keyboard labeled, smite.

What I find somewhat troubling is that this is accurate picture for how some people view God, usually with a bit of moralism tacked on for good measure. Be good or God is going to get you.

People will point to the story of how God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness as a cut and dried example of how God with his smite button works, and yet when we open to Genesis we discover some interesting complexities. In today's lesson from Genesis we hear the story of bargaining negotiations that sound a note of mercy into the midst of a story about destruction.

Last week our lesson from Genesis was a story of hospitality, as Abraham welcomes three strangers who convey the startling news that Abraham's wife, Sarah, though advanced in years, will conceive and bear a son. Now Abraham follows this trio as they head out on the next phase of their journey and one of these strangers is identified as the Lord. We're told that the Lord does not hide from Abraham what he is about to do, because he has chosen Abraham and the children of Abraham to follow in the Lord's way of righteousness and justice. The Lord lets

Abraham in on the details of his next expedition. First, confirm the reports of wickedness, and then destroy Sodom.

Old Testament professor Walter Brueggemann notes that the awesome tasks of God and his messengers is to bring about both beginnings and endings. And he says, “Times of beginning and ending are times when the mystery of life becomes most urgent and when the hardest theological questions must be asked.”

All sorts of questions can arise in the midst of beginnings and endings: Is God real? How do I imagine God? Who am I? Why am I here? What is life really all about? How am I connected to others? How am I connected to God? What’s God’s true nature? Times of beginnings and endings are times to live into our questions.

Today, as we enter into this story of Abraham’s bartering with the Lord. How will it mold our imaginative living as sons and daughters of Abraham, that blessed ancestor of our faith? What does it have to teach us about God and our relationship to God? What might it teach us about our relationship to others, including those of other faith traditions?

It is predicted that within 15 years, Islam will pass Christianity as the largest religion in the world. Perhaps one important thing to keep in mind as we live through this transition, one thing that just might help us to stay a bit more calm and not get caught up in the swirl of societal fear and anxiety around us, is to reclaim our lineage from Abraham. All Muslims, just like all Christians and all Jews are the blessed descendants of Abraham.

We could also probably learn a thing or two from our Muslim brothers and sister about prayer, as they pause 5 times throughout the day to pray. In our gospel we hear Jesus disciple’s request, “Lord, teach us to pray,” which points out our innate human desire to enter into relationship with God, but also how we’re often unsure about what to say, and what to do.

Prayer, I believe is something that no matter how much we practice, we always remain beginners. We can’t master prayer, but we pray in order that we may be mastered. Today, I propose that we take the disciple’s request, “Lord, teach us to pray,” and lay it aside this story from Genesis. Let’s let Abraham be our teacher. If we look at his conversation with the Lord as prayer, what might we learn from it about prayer?

Two words come to mind as I hear Abraham’s address to God, boldness and humility. Abraham was bold enough to petition God to spare the community for the sake of 50 righteous people, and then, as he bargained his way down to 10, he did so with the utmost sense of reverence and humility. “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.

Abraham exhibits a ‘fear of the Lord,’ even as he goes toe to toe with him. So don’t be bashful. We too can boldly enter into dialogue with this one who is the creator of the universe, simultaneously keeping in mind that we are dust and to dust we will return. We have come forth from the earth for a limited time. With a sense of gratitude for the gift of life, we would be wise to maintain like Abraham before us, reverence for the giver.

This sense of reverence and boldness is apparent right at the start of the prayer Jesus teaches. Father, hallowed be your name. It takes courage to use an intimate address like Father, and a stance of humility to acknowledge God’s holiness, boldness and humility.

Two other words come to mind as I consider Abraham's give and take with God as prayer: particularity and community. It was a particular situation that Abraham was addressing with God, and I think it's helpful to keep in mind that Abraham's nephew Lot was residing in Sodom at the time. In our prayer we too can enter into the scandal of particularity, petitioning for the particular situations and persons that are near and dear to us. The Greek understanding was that God was so vast and great that he wouldn't pay attention to the particulars of mere mortal's lives, and they scoffed at this Jewish notion. It's one idea that Jesus affirmed by teaching us to pray, give us this day our daily bread. We each have particular needs and particular journeys.

Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, highlights the communal aspect of Abraham's prayer by linking it to the African concept of Ubuntu: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." The righteous and the wicked live intertwined in a community. Righteousness is not a private spiritual property. The good effect of the righteous, though they are a minority, must have healing power in the community where "I am because we are . . ." He says, "The intriguing story of Abraham interceding for Sodom is not really about a numbers game but about the salvific significance of the righteous in a corrupt community."

An individual life of prayer then isn't solely for one's own personal faith journey, but for the sake of transforming the world. A handful of righteous people in a congregation can heal and change it. Likewise, a righteous, justice-seeking congregation can also transform the neighborhood and community in which it is set.

At the heart of Abraham's prayerful conversation with God is forgiveness. Abraham reminds God of God's true nature, "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked! . . . Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" God agrees to forgive them all for the sake of 50 righteous. God is in the forgiveness business, calling us all to participate in the work of reconciling the world. Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those indebted to us."

One thing that I've learned over the years about forgiveness is that our forgiving of others isn't as much for their sake, as it is for our own. Forgiving another frees us from the poisons of hatred and resentment that work like battery acid and eat away our souls. I also don't think that we can fully experience the freeing power of forgiveness in our own lives if we're not practicing forgiveness. I know it's not easy. It's a process that takes time, sometimes even decades.

Perhaps the important thing is to follow God's lead here and just be willing. God's willing for the sake of 50 to forgive. Do I hear 45? 45. How about 30? Here we go, 30 going once... 30. 20 can you make it twenty? Sure 20. 20 it is. Do I hear 10? I'm looking for 10. I guess 20 it is then -going once, going twice... 10. We have it down to ten? Can we go any lower? -For the sake of 10 righteous, going once, going twice, gone. For the sake of 10, I will not destroy them.

Our God truly is a God of mercy, and can teach us that path as well.

You very well might know the rest of the story. Ten could not be found. The fire and sulphur came down and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, even in the midst of destruction there is also salvation. The 29th verse of the 19th chapter reads: So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.

God remembered Abraham. God remembered the promised to bless Abraham, and all the families of the earth through him. Even in the midst of death and destruction there is mercy and salvation. That's the story of Jesus as well. Through this one, the Christ, the whole world is saved.

It's our story too. As the modern day descendents of Abraham, as the body of Christ in the world here in this place, on this very day, God's mercy flows through us to bless the world.

In a world that sometimes only gets the impression that God's main business is to sit at his computer with his finger poised over the smite button, we can both tell and show them a God who is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

An active prayer life tends to keep us more calm and steady through the many trials of life. It can also keep us leaning into our questions as we traverse all sorts of beginnings and endings. It connects us to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to one another, and to unseen sons and daughters of Abraham around the world.

So today, with boldness and humility we join with disciples of every time and every place in our unending request. Lord, teach us to pray.