



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 28, 2019
GENESIS 18:20-32; PSALM 138; COLOSSIANS 2:6-15; LUKE 11:1-13

RETHINKING SODOM AND THE NATURE OF GOD

Genesis 18:20-32 *[The Lord said to Abraham, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! 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." So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 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? 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?" And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. 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." Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." 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." 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." 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."*

Some 25 years ago well before I became a priest, I served on the vestry of a small church back in Arkansas where one day the priest decided to change from using the traditional Lord's Prayer in the services on Sunday, (Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name), to the contemporary version that we use here so often (Our Father in heaven hallowed by your name). And two or three weeks after the change, an elderly woman in the parish who

was something of a conservative, a traditionalist, she approached me, me after the service and inquired why was this change made. I told her she should go ask the priest that question since he was the one who made that decision, but she seemed unconvinced and wanted to bend my ear instead. She launched into a distressed cry, and said she just wanted to say the actual words that Jesus said...

Our Father, who art in heaven...

Uh, Mrs. Smith, I don't think Jesus knew Elizabethan English... It was not a helpful retort on my part. Even if it is an instructive story for us all as a community of faith.

Most scholars agree today that when Jesus tells us in this gospel passage, tells the disciples to pray this way, he wasn't saying use those exact words, but the phrases he offers are meant to be guides, a roadmap of sorts into the relationship with a God who is earnestly listening, always listening, and if we will listen, then maybe a God who will respond as well. Prayer is an invitation into dialog with the God whose reign of peace we long for, who provides our needs, who calls us into particular ways of living that involve forgiveness, resisting evil, and being mindful of the needs of others.

This is why the Lord's Prayer is a fine template for us and why we use it week by week, day by day in our prayerful life even if it risks becoming rote because it is a guide for us as we strive to embrace this way of life that is grounded in the relational identity as people of God.

But I will tell you much more intriguing than that passage in the gospel this morning for me this week has been this curious passage from the book of Genesis that we heard read a few moments ago, you know the one where Abraham is seemingly bargaining with God to consider sparing the righteous ones who may be caught up in the city of Sodom.

Fifty Lord, would that work, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10... how many, O Lord, must there be for you to consider sparing them?

It's an odd story, isn't it? But a fascinating one too I'll tell you. It wouldn't let me go this week. So this is where I want to focus this morning, I'll tell you now, that it is something of a technical sermon to list the stories out of ancient history and perhaps into an application in our lives here and now. And with that

in mind, I have three themes that I want to trace from this passage:

1. The destruction of Sodom is not about homosexuality no matter how prevalent that is understood to be. It just isn't.
2. The bargaining between Abraham and Yahweh is a remarkable portal for us to understand the nature of prayer and through it, to understand the nature of God in a way radically different than those who pre-date Abraham would have been. In fact, it is so much an important part of our identity even today that this is our story and we are called to wrestle with it. This passage is a portal for us.
3. I would present to you the possibility that God is open to redirection, as odd as that may sound.

So have I piqued your interest at all? Shall we dive in?

We need to set the scene first. This passage we heard this morning is the second of three acts that go together as part of a saga that unfolds across chapters 18 and 19 of Genesis—read the full story, if you dare. But know that if you do, it must not be taken literally. You will fail to see the truth in it if you do. It requires interpretation as all of our scriptures do. And to be sure, there are problematic parts in this saga. But here's the important part. If all of it is stipulated upon the intimate relationship Abraham and Yahweh share because of the covenant that they gathered together, made together, as recorded back in chapter 12 of Genesis. In fact, that's where you want to start if you want to read it. Go back to 12 and read on through because in 12 we hear that Abraham is blessed so that he might be a blessing for all the families of the earth. It is a vocation. And we are descendants of Abraham sitting here this morning.

We heard the first act of this three-part story last week, when three strangers visited Abraham and Sarah, and told them that Sarah was going to have a son, despite her long having gone menopause. She laughs at the thought. But the author of Genesis tips

their hand and lets us know that these visitors are actually two angels and Yahweh, who is the source of this miracle which will have global implications, effectuated all by a birth to a really old couple.

And then if we jump over to chapter 19, the third act is when the two angels end up in Sodom. They are sent there by Yahweh to determine whether the prayerful pleas that Yahweh is hearing out of the people suffering in Sodom are substantiated, and if so, are they sufficient to prompt God to rain down fire upon the city in judgment for its wickedness.

Now you need to know we don't get chapter 19 and the destruction of Sodom anywhere in our lectionary. You won't get it on a Sunday morning, you will have to go read it yourself, offline if you want. It is disturbing, but there is some truth underneath it, because it is an ancient myth. Scholars think that the story of Sodom is much older material than what is in Genesis. Several centuries older evolving from an Ancient Near East myth, about the collapse of an ancient village in the region, perhaps destroyed by a volcano or earthquake, they were both common in the area, but they were interpreted as the destruction being caused by the gods as punishment for the city's corrupt ways because that is how the gods had always behaved throughout history—rewards for being good, punishment for being bad. It's a theology of moralism upon which many of us were raised even in modernity. You'd better watch out; you'd better not shout; who's been naughty or nice—it's the same. Rewards for being good, punishment for being bad. It's not our theology.

More specifically, many of us have been taught that the sin of Sodom warranting destruction was that of homosexuality, but it is simply not the case. That perversion of the text, Genesis 19, developed many centuries later in the 11th century in fact in the Middle Ages and eventually found its way into modern Christian fundamentalism where many of us picked up some of that misguidance. That misinterpretation that it's dependent upon, homosexuality as the need for destruction, comes out of one proof-text of

Genesis 19:5 which describes a mob of Sodom's men going to the door of the man who invited the two angels, (the two men) in as hospitality for strangers. And the mob is saying, send them out so that we may know them. "Know them" not the word used in the bible for homosexuality or homosexual acts; but know them for the violence of a mob saying we will not tolerate strangers in this place, send them out so that we may know them and kill them. That's the problem here. The verb for homosexual actions is not in this passage. It's about violence to the stranger.

Now Sodom is referenced several other places in the bible as an example of society, an example, think mythic, example of society run amok with pride, arrogance, gluttony, and reckless disregard for those in need. And reckless disregard for the stranger. The indictment on Sodom is in its corrupted and disordered society that has turned against the ways we are called to treat one another.

Can you hear the echo of that indictment down into our own day? In our own nation? In our own society? In our own village? And if we on that trajectory that might spell destruction for civilization as we know it—hatred, xenophobia, climate change. If we are on that trajectory, if such forces of arrogance and neglect continue to erode the fabric of societal well-being? What are we, as people of God, to do about it? That's what this story is about.

Which brings me back to the second act, the one we heard this morning with Abraham engaging Yahweh in his serial petitions, asking humbly what would it take for the city to be spared for the sake of the righteous. Some scholars believe this isn't bargaining at all, it's actually a brilliant theological innovation that allows us to glimpse in a transition point in understanding who God is in a glimpse into the prayerful life of one so intimately engaged with the relationship with God that he can ask any question in that relationship. And it is fair game. He can trust God so fully that no question is off-limits when it arises from the heart of one longing to make sense of his world or to ease the pain of her world.

And this is the invitation for us, all of us in our own prayer lives—to embrace the relationship with God so fully that an abiding trust creates the space for us to ask any question, any request can be made, and that nothing is beyond the scope of possibility with this God of ours.

My friends, our scriptures are replete with this pattern of prayer grounded in a consummate trust that God can handle anything, whatever it is that we bring to the relationship. God can handle it and Jesus says, when you pray, pray this way. Be all in with the relationship. And if you do, it will change your life. If you do, it will change the world.

Who knows, maybe even God might change. I know that sounds crazy to the traditionalist's ear, even heretical perhaps. But here's the truth. The bible has several accounts of God changing God's mind—we need to look no further than Noah, the book of Isaiah, or the prophet Jeremiah, or Job, or the prophet Hosea, or even the gospels in which God gives up the old ways of score-keeping that every disease, every affliction, every shortcoming is seen as a consequence of sin and says phooey on that. (I was thinking of another word, but I caught myself.) God says no to that. Bring what you have on your heart. Be all in. The scare theology of moralism was long ago replaced by a God of steadfast love and mercy, still exacting judgment when we refuse to turn away from evil but always longing for the chance for God

to be redirected whenever we open the relationship to that possibility.

And that conversion of God can be traced exactly back to this Genesis chapter 18 and this engagement between Abraham and God in which Abraham pleads with God to be different, be different than all the other gods who have gone before, to be the God of the covenant that Abraham knew God to be, to be the God of consummate justice when dealing in human history, to be gracious and merciful, not because the guilty necessarily deserved it, but simply because Yahweh is that kind of God.

And only because God is that kind of God can we even begin to make our prayer “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who are indebted to us.”

It's about relationship, it's about being born in the covenant with a too-old couple who were willing to share God's dream for them and for the world, even for us here today, and live along that promise of blessing for all the families of the earth.

So daughters and sons of Abraham, we have work to do. We have work to do.

When we make our prayer, bless us O God, that we may be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Amen.

Reference

Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis. Interpretation Series: A commentary for teaching and preaching.* John Knox Press. 1982.

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