



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

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7th Sunday after Pentecost: July 28, 2019

Sermon Title: "Stretching Our Hearts"

Texts: Genesis 18:22-32; Luke 11:1-13

Before we get to Jesus and the Lord's Prayer, let's start all the way at the other end, all the way back in Genesis, the beginning of Scripture. So today we hear Abraham interceding on behalf of people who have greatly displeased God. Sodom and Gomorrah are a mess and God's going to do something about it. Before we dig into Abraham's loving plea, we need to get to know the Sodomites. Ask lots of folks and they'll say that Sodom's sinfulness is sexual. Their eyes narrow and hearts harden. When God's messengers go to Sodom as they have told Abraham they will, his nephew Lot will urge them to shelter in his home for their safety. There's no way to sugar coat it- while the messengers are there, a crowd of men comes banging on the door demanding to have their way with the strangers. That's not so much about sex as it is violence.

And yet, the Hebrew Bible seems to view the sin of Sodomites as being about other concerns. The prophet Ezekiel says, " This was the guilt of your sister, Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty." (Ezekiel 16:49-50). Jesus will tell his disciples as he sends them out that where they encounter inhospitable places, it would be better for Sodom and Gomorrah than such a place (Mt. 11:24).

Despite being warned by God's messengers to leave, many of Lot's extended family will turn from God's grace and choose to stay in such a violent and inhospitable place because of the abundance.

These are the Sodomites.

These are the people for whom Abraham has interceded- in a bold and compassionate give and take with God.

Not just interceding for his nephew, whom he never names, but for a whole people he doesn't know but with whom he sees a connection. God has told

Abraham that he will not only be a father to nations, but has charged him with teaching everyone God's ways of justice and righteousness.

I think he is now making that connection.

What if today's story is not so much a telling of changing God's mind, but is in part about God leading Abraham into expanding his heart for justice and righteousness? After all, it almost seems like God sounds more like we do and Abraham sounds more like our gracious God. Their hearts grow closer.

Growing up, I thought God in this story sounded vengeful and demanding. Read narrowly, this exchange between God and Abraham sounds like trying to change the mind of an angry vengeful OT God who needs to be talked down from the ledge, not like gentle loving Jesus. If that's what we walk with, we fall into a trap-seeing groups of people as uniform, labeling sinners and assessing their righteousness, deciding we know enough to cast them aside. In such moments, our hearts fashion a God whose heart is too small.

Knowing more, I am tempted to see the Sodomites are heartless. And I see God as heartbroken with good reason. An easy place for a knee jerk reaction.

Yet, here comes Abraham asking whether there might still be some righteous people there too, and if so, should they experience the same outcome? The more expansive, gospel view is that Abraham is not so much negotiating as he is praying. Interceding on behalf of others, for sinners, even the ones in an awful place like Sodom, and this story can teach us to pray for all the modern day Sodom places that we find troubling, and people with whom we struggle to connect, or from whom we are tempted to turn away.

Because God's not asking us to judge, but calling us to love.

Our psalm this day proclaims, "On the day I called, you answered me, and you increased my strength of soul." A life of prayer brings us to such a place- where we are face to face with the tensions and pains of life, and the give and take of encountering a gracious and merciful God. Our souls are strengthened not only for our own sake but for all the places and people for whom God wants to expand our hearts.

And so I offer three points we can takeaway from Abraham today-

1. Be bold like Abraham. God is willing to hear our questions, even allow us to debate and discuss. And to remember when we are asking God to save people, we are asking for something that is always God's will. God is in the business of salvation and transformation, not condemnation.
2. God's character and will are the basis for our appeal. Abraham isn't offering to do something for God In return for God's favor, trying to buy God's response. He is appealing to God's own graciousness and justice and righteousness. He's

not cheapening this exchange as a transaction. He is magnifying God by claiming the truth- that God wants to spare lives.

3. Be persistent. Abraham is certainly a guide for persistence here. But even more so is God, who decided that long after Genesis that even when every other messenger failed, God sent Jesus to show us in the flesh the heart of God for humanity. And even then when every person turned away from Jesus on the cross, Christ accomplished for us what we could not, so that destruction will never have the last word, love and mercy will.

This is the God we meet in prayer, whose desire and will, the kingdom, should always be our prayer. St. Augustine once wrote, “God wants us to exercise our desire through our prayers.” Prayer is like a stretching exercise for our hearts. The best prayer for our exercising is the one Jesus gives. Augustine says, “You will be guided into the right way by studying the Lord’s Prayer. Think long and hard about this great model of prayer and be sure your own appeals fit it. (One) who says in prayer... “Give me as much wealth as you have given to this or that man or increase my honors; make me eminent in power and fame in the world’ and asks merely from a desire for these things, and not in order to benefit (others)... I do not think will find any part of the Lord’s Prayer in connection with which (one) could fit in these requests.”

And we cannot pray this prayer only for ourselves- there is no “I” or “me” to be found. Only “us” as a whole, and “others” with whom we struggle. And never a word of “you get what you deserve.”

This prayer opens the door of our hearts and stretches us. It strengthens our souls, and has the capacity to give life for all. With this prayer, Jesus sends us to pray for and embody God’s justice and righteousness for others- to labor for justice, and bear witness to divine mercy and grace. Our youth just spent time in New York City living this out. A place with both extreme wealth and extreme want. They participated in radical hospitality. It looked like daily bread, and grace for those we don’t really know, and resisting the temptation to harden our hearts and focus upon ourselves. I delight in their telling of both their challenges and joys. Even more so that they chose to pray and serve even in, or even especially in the face of doubts, believing in God’s promise for us all.

That promise found In Abraham’s prayer and in Christ of the cross is this- God tenaciously refuses to abandon this world to its own destruction. May this be our persistent prayer as we join our hearts to the heart of God for all.