

Proper 12C 7/28/2007
Genesis 18:20-33
Luke 11:1-13

Abraham was a wise man, well perhaps not so much a wise man as much a shrewd one. A shrewd business man as some would see it. In our reading from Genesis, God rails against Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah, it seems, have been guilty of some sins. Naughty, naughty. To many, that sin is homosexuality. But they would be wrong. The denizens of Sodom and Gomorrah are not so much guilty of the benign reality of settling down with someone of the same sex. Nothing is so very odd about that, methinks. Instead, the Sodom and Gomorrah-ites are guilty of being inhospitable to strangers, a serious offense in the ancient Middle East. As a result, God becomes very angry and bent on wrathful destruction.

But a shrewd Abraham the just stands up and reveals his wise self. Nonverbally, Abraham moves to a place of equality with God. He begins a negotiation to save those in Sodom and Gomorrah, in spite of their sins. He does the unthinkable. He haggles with God like they are at some Middle Eastern Bazaar. Abraham demands that if a certain number of good people are there in Sodom and Gomorrah, surely it is not worth destroying them to destroy the evil ones too. He rails that it is not like God, to sweep away the righteous with the evil-doers. Abraham makes God ponder possibility of unintended casualties. And God agrees, backs down. If there are 50 righteous people in the towns, God will not destroy them. Shrewd Abraham, though, pushes even further. If there are 45-alright, 40-Yes, 30-Yes, or-20- Yes, God will not destroy the villages. Abraham is on a roll. And God is beginning to lose God's taste for vengeance. If you did not notice, God is being changed by the grace of man. And once more, Abraham asks, if there are even 10, God will not burn the people. And the bargaining is done. 10 is the critical mass. 10 good people will save the towns from destruction and from the works of countless bad people. Abraham returns to his place, sitting, farther away from God.

Unfortunately, as we know, there were fewer than 10. The towns supposedly go down in flames only to be remembered in our stories, and through a pillar of salt known as Lot's wife. But in this "text of terror" (phrase of Phyllis Trible) there really is a surprising and delightful amount of grace, and that is what I would like to talk about today. Because, in those moments of bargaining, I believe that Abraham has understood something insightful about humanity, and he has begun to better understand God, no matter what happens next.

The grace in this story of Abraham, I believe, is rooted in an underlying premise that Abraham has about humanity. In fact, I would say that this premise is so assumed that we often overlook it as a subject. But Abraham does not. Abraham understands that the foundation to his entire bargaining process is this: human activity is contagious. It is not only that God must not punish a good minority of folks because a majority are evil. It is also that Abraham demands that whether we are good or whether we are bad, we often inspire the same behavior in others. Good inspires good, can save a people, just as bad inspires evil and can destroy us. It is something that can be scientifically backed up with the concept of mirror neurons which make us feel and react to situations exactly as those around us respond and react. And this is foundational to Abraham's bargaining because he comprehends that even as few as 10 good people might transform a whole

village for good, and yet, a rotten apple could spoil the bunch. Everything he argues for rests on this reality.

Abraham is beginning to understand something about God that is really important and frankly a breakthrough. Abraham says to God, "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?" Abraham is beginning to understand the reality of this God of ours: not a god acting on whims and flights of fancy like the Pantheon, but a reliable, thoughtful God acting out justice and concern for all parties involved, even minorities such as the righteous 10. Abraham makes God be more like God.

But since Abraham is only getting a glimpse, he also does not get the full picture. And I feel that I must carry Abraham to the next step, to where he could not go. For Abraham stops short of the real words that need to be spoken to God. I would say that Abraham needed to say to God, "Far be it from you to destroy even the wicked." He should have bargained to the point of saying, "Even if there are no righteous, will you not destroy them." After all, God was saying yes and agreeing to everything anything Abraham proposed. He should have pushed further. And here, I want to make a claim that might seem downright un-Biblical but is true non-the-less. God never destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. If anyone died there, they died in human hands, because unfortunately, those 10 righteous were unable to "infect" their world with good. God had nothing to do with it except perhaps helping those who were righteous convert others and loving those who were evil. But Abraham's argument is a step in our journey toward understanding that reality of who God is.

It might seem odd, that on a day when we hear about Sodom and Gomorrah, we also hear Luke's account of Jesus teaching his disciples to pray, sharing with them what would evolve into our own Lord's Prayer. But in effect, the prayer relies on two assumptions related to Abraham's encounter with God. Jesus relies on the same presumption that human behavior is contagious. Jesus teaches us to pray so that we might mirror and be infected by the prayers and love of Jesus instead of the prayers of those who wish harm. And Jesus also relies on Abraham's work, carried to the next level. The prayer depends on an understanding that God is not interested in destroying God's creation, even when we seemingly turn away from God. And so, we pray that we might forgive others, just like we will be shown with the person of Jesus that we are forgiven. Jesus is teaching us how to be like those ten righteous, holding onto our sense of God, even as minorities, and hoping to infect the world with a better way of being.

While I was away on vacation, I realize that we passed by a significant milestone in the life of our church. On July 15th, 1857, the cornerstone for this parish was laid, 150 years ago. No, we did not have a large celebration. And, it is not the birthday of our church. Our church was in existence long before our building. And the church is the people not the building. But ideally, at St. A's our foundation here is not only concrete. Hopefully, we rest ourselves on and worship on a foundation of the Abraham's grace and his glimpse of God as fully realized with Jesus. And hopefully, we seek to infect the wider community with the certain, necessary, and timely message that God is only about loving us and helping us to love one another, including the message that God would never have destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. If those beliefs and that love are our

bricks, our mortar, and our foundation, then, 150 years is really worth celebrating... not because the building still stands, but because we are still here. I close with the words of Paul to the Colossians, "As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

, and frankly, we should be re-interpreting the whole account of Sodom and Gomorrah through the grace seen in this passage. .