

Amazing Prayer – Amazing Grace

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 17
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Sunday, July 25, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 18: 20-32

Sodom and Gamorrah – the names are synonymous with decadence and sin. And within the stories associated with those cities, there is that wonderful tale about Abraham standing before God, which was our first lesson read today. It's a scene that almost sounds like a yard-sale barter. We have a price set, a counter-offer made, and the negotiating begins. One wonders who has their tongue in their cheek during this exchange – Abraham or God, until we realize that this is not about a price of discarded furniture or worn-out clothes, but this is a discussion that centers around lives, human lives.

And I think if we pay attention to this fascinating story, it has some important things to tell us about prayer, about righteousness, and about God's grace. Let's take them on in that order.

First, a lesson on prayer. Let me begin with another story. Pastor Bob Kaul of Minnesota tells of the time when the local high school wrestling team, along with the coaching staff, cheerleaders and chaperones, 28 people in all, traveled to the state capital for a major wrestling meet. Since it would be an all day event, they would stay overnight and return home the next day. After they did return home, rumors spread like wild-fire that one of the cheerleaders and several of the wrestlers had been drinking. No one was caught, and no one came forward to confess, but the word got around the community and pretty soon parents, teachers, and other students wanted some justice done.

The athletic director was put on the spot. The local school board wanted action. The administration demanded punishment of some sort. So, the athletic director, unable to discover who was guilty, decided to punish the whole team. They would forfeit one match, but that one loss would ruin their hopes for a league championship.

This decision satisfied the administration, the school board, and many of the towns-folk. But how do you think the innocent felt? It was a small handful who got into trouble. Was the punishment of the whole fair because of the actions of a few? "How can you punish the good and the bad together?" came the cry of those who were innocent of any wrong-doing.

Well, as you heard that first lesson a moment ago, isn't that part of the same issue in that story? Isn't this, too, a story about fairness and justice and what is right?

Here we have Abraham standing toe to toe with God. And from this encounter, there are, I think, three lessons about prayer for us. First, prayer is standing boldly before our God. Note, there is no arrogance here. Nor is this exchange with God a battle of wills or a struggle for supremacy or who's on top of the pile. Abraham knew who he was before God: "I am but dust and ashes," he says. No, this is a boldness born of intimacy, of

relationship, of trust. Abraham knew that God would listen to him; so, he was bold to speak.

Second, we should note what it is that Abraham did with this prayer – he called God into account for his pending actions against Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham says: “Will you, indeed, sweep away the righteous with the wicked? . . . Far be that from you. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”

Here we have Abraham doing what each of us must trust and be bold to do – to take God at God’s word. As theologian Karl Barth says, we must hold God to God’s promises. And this is exactly what Abraham is doing; he is claiming and demanding justice from a just God. The world, the towns-folk, clamor for punishment and retribution and examples to be set. But Abraham is saying, “Lord, you don’t operate like that. You believe in what is fair and just and right.” Prayer is holding God to his promises and trusting that God will deal with us out of his love and mercy and grace.

Then, notice the third element of prayer, found also in the Gospel account I read for this morning. There is persistence to prayer that won’t let God go. Right after the teaching of the Lord’s Prayer in Luke, we have that little story about the persistent friend who has a need, who simply won’t go away and will not take “no” for an answer. That’s how prayer captures God. We dare to hold God to who he is and what he has promised with a bold persistence born of faith and hope and love.

But as I mentioned at the outset of this sermon, this story is more than about prayer and bargaining with God. It also has something to tell us about righteousness. Notice how easily God keeps lowering the figure of how many it will take to save those cities – from 50, to 45 to 40, 30, 20 and 10. Ten righteous people is all that is needed to do the saving work. Ten! What does that tell us about the power of righteousness to save and redeem? Righteousness has a way of multiplying, of growing and spreading, as those who are redeemed reach out to embrace the world around them.

In the popular Broadway musical of a decade ago, *Les Mis*, based on Victor Hugo’s dramatic play, there is a lesson worth noting that points to what I have just tried to articulate. Jean Valjean has just been released from 19 years on the chain gang as the play begins. He finds that the yellow ticket-of-leave he must display condemns him to be an outcast in his society. Only the local Bishop treats him with compassion and respect. And what does Valjean do? He steals the silver tableware of his only friend in the whole world.

Valjean is caught and brought back by the police, and is amazed when the Bishop lies and tells the police that he had given the silver to him as a gift. The Bishop then does the even more unthinkable, and hands him the two other valuable candlesticks in the presence of the police. Valjean is so overcome by the Bishop’s forgiveness and grace that he starts a new life and vows to be a new man – which he does.

Fiction? Yes. High drama and wonderful Broadway, especially when combined with the rich musical score? Of course. True account? In many more ways that we can ever personally know. I would venture to say that everyone here could name at least one person who was set on the right track in life because someone else believed in them, trusted them, befriended them, and gave them a second or a third or a fifth chance.

Can ten make a difference? You bet. Ten can become twenty, and twenty forty, and forty eighty, and on and on – because that is the nature of goodness and righteousness in the world. That’s part of this story’s moral as well. The ten can and do save the cities.

But there is one catch to this. The effect of ten becoming twenty and so on does not come by simply wishing it so. Work, effort, prayer, courage on behalf of God is what makes the change. God’s response to Abraham lends an enormous weight to the importance of every Christian’s vocation as an ambassador for a righteous Lord. We can make a difference – but we have to make the effort. We need to feed the hungry and house the homeless. We need to preach and practice justice and fairness and equality in this world. We need to be people of peace and forgiveness in our homes and schools and at our jobs. Only then can ten make the difference. Only then.

There is, I believe, one more lesson here for us this morning. And I discovered it in speculating about that conversation between Abraham and God. I asked myself: “What if Abraham hadn’t stopped at ten?” God, after all, gave no indication that he was done negotiating. There was no hint that that figure was the bottom line of the deal.

And then it hit me. This scene about sin and corruption leading to death and destruction got played out later in history. If Abraham had pushed his efforts a little further, he might have learned what we know – that God was prepared to spare all of human kind for one righteous person, even if he had to send him himself to do so. For who among us can make any claims of righteousness apart from Christ, apart from God’s grace in accepting us as who we are, as we are? Looking around today, I would have to say that there aren’t ten left, Lord, in Camp Hill, in spite of our best efforts to the contrary. We are still sinful, willful, forgetful people. And thank the Good Lord that his love, grace and acceptance of us does not depend on our efforts, no matter how well-intentioned, how noble, how sincere, or how self-righteous they may be.

Rather, let our prayer be: “Lord, there aren’t ten left. But there is one – and we will claim him, as he claims us; and we will love him and serve him and spread his righteousness as you give us courage and strength so to do. Oh, and God, thanks for the lesson on prayer and righteousness, but most of all we thank you for your amazing grace. There’s only one righteous one here, O Lord, but we know him and we choose to cling to him. He is your Son, and he is our Savior.”

AMEN.

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