

Amen

Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

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Several years ago I walked down a narrow street in old Jerusalem lined with shops and markets, a kind of bazaar with crowded with people laughing and what sounded like arguing. As I passed shop owners would shout and almost waylay me, trying to sell me this or that: rugs, t-shirts, souvenirs, trinkets, or perhaps a genuine copy of the original crown of thorns, or if I'd been Muslim perhaps it would have been a piece of Mohammed's tunic, or if Jewish, part of King David's slingshot. They'd shout, "This rug only \$200! But for you \$100!" As I kept on walking, they'd continue to shout, "\$50! Come on, you can't buy this anywhere else for this cheap! Come, only \$20!" They so wanted me to haggle with them. I got the feeling that the haggling and arguing was more important than the actual purchase. They wanted me to engage, out argue them, persist. Persistence in haggling was central to the culture. It was and is central to be in a kind of relationship in a way that is strange to my Western understanding.

Our lessons today tell us that prayer involves that same kind of persistent haggling. This kind of haggling, persistent prayer is about relationship. It is intense; it is involved, and takes our total engagement. And in that kind of prayer we learn to say, "Amen."

In our Gospel reading today from Luke 11, Jesus has been praying just as he did every day. When he walks up the disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray" (11:1). So Jesus responds by teaching them what we've come to call the Lord's

Prayer. He follows by telling them a story. Prayer is like going to your next-door neighbor at midnight and asking for some food because you've had a visitor show up unexpectedly late and you had nothing in the house to feed them. Your next-door neighbor yells through the window, "Leave me alone! I'm already in bed. The house is locked, the kids are asleep, and I'm not getting up to give you some food." Jesus says that though your neighbor might not get up and get some food for you because you're friends, he will do so because of your persistence. "You keep on banging on his door and he will finally give you what you ask" (11:8).

Jesus expounds on this by saying, "Ask and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (11:9). He continues by giving examples of persistent asking and receiving, because of persistent asking of a good and generous God who will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask (11:13).

The other place Luke tells us that Jesus teaches about prayer is in Luke 18 and the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge. Here too, Jesus' teaching on prayer is centered on persistence. The judge gives the woman the justice she seeks, because as he says in the parable, "she keeps bothering me" and so "she will not wear me out I'll give her what she asks" (see 18:1-8).

The old truth is that prayer changes things. It either changes God or it changes us. Either way, there is change. But it is not quick and easy. It's a long road. You have to stick with it. As Milton says, "Hard are the ways of truth, and rough to walk" (*PR*. I. 478).

And though I might wish it were different, to this I must also say, "Amen."

To say “amen” is to say, “that’s the truth” or “this is true.” It is the Hebrew word we learn from the Psalms that means, “so be it” or “yes, that’s correct.” When in the Gospels Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you...” He is saying, “Amen, I say to you.” And every time we pray, we have learned to say, “This is the truth. So be it.” Every time we say the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name... we end by saying, “amen!” This is truth.

But what we learn from Jesus is that the truth of knowing God in prayer, the truth of relationship with God is hard. Perhaps it is hard because God is difficult for us. We’re not playing games here. This is about ultimate things. Walter Brueggemann says God is inscrutable and irascible. God is holy and wholly other. Isaiah says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is. 55:8-9). Part of what prayer does is help us know the God who is not easily known in our sinful, self-centered lives. Prayer bends our lives toward God – and we do not particularly like to be bent to anything. This is the truth. Amen.

At the same time, the remarkable biblical truth is that sometimes prayer changes God. Persistent prayer, persistent intercession sometimes changes God. Why? How? I don’t know. Maybe it is because God gets tired of listening to us. Or maybe it is for other reasons. We do know that God loves us and sometimes God changes God’s mind in relation to us. Prayer is about relationship and because of who God is and because of God’s relationship with us, sometimes God changes God’s mind. This is also the truth. Amen.

In our Old Testament reading today, we pick up Genesis where we left it last week. The “men” or “angels” or “visitors from God,” after visiting elderly Abraham and Sarah and telling them in one year they will have a son, depart and go toward Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham goes along with them part of the way. The men make it clear that they have come to destroy these two cities, because God has heard the “outcry” against them.

Here I must slow down because we are dealing with hard stuff. This is difficult and to make our way through this takes some persistence. Like prayer, reading Scripture takes persistence; it takes slow, hard work. For a lot of us, this is one of those places early in the Bible, where we stop and don’t read on. This is a hard story but to grasp what’s going we have to keep going and do slow, close reading. So listen to what I say.

Our reading today, Genesis 18:20-32 is an interlude in the overall narrative. The overall narrative picks up in chapter 19 where the angels go to Abraham’s brother, Lot’s house in Sodom and stay there. Soon, a mob of people from Sodom surround the house and demand access to the visitors because they want to gang rape them and if they’re not allowed in, Lot and his family will get even worse treatment.

The mob is eventually struck blind and Lot and his family get out of town just before God rains down fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorrah, destroying the cities completely.

One of the reasons we want to slow down when reading this is so we’ll be clear about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. The quick and popular reading is that

it is homosexuality, and this is the source of the word “sodomy.” But if the reader will do some work, it is clear that the Bible gives considerable evidence that Sodom’s sin is not specifically sexual, and certainly not homosexuality as we know it today. Sodom’s sin is a general disorder, decadence, and rebellion against God and all things of God. Isaiah says it is injustice (1:10; 3:9). Jeremiah (23:14) names several offenses to God and Ezekiel (16:49) says the sin is pride, gluttony, excessive wealth combined with indifference and injustice toward the needy. Now, people will interpret all this differently and disagree over Sodom’s sin but be clear, that the Bible itself disagrees over what it is. What the Bible agrees upon is that the sin is great and pervasive.

What we get in chapter 19 is a terribly immoral people and an angry and moral God, and let there be no doubt that Sodom and Gomorrah deserve everything they get. The quick and facile reading is that God is the one who punishes sinners. God keeps an accounting of who stays within the lines and who strays outside the lines and those who go outside the lines will be punished. This is the simple and popular teaching that God is a God of retribution and religion is about fear of keeping the rules.

Of course, it takes no work to believe in such a God and to believe in such a religion. It was true back in the days of Abraham and it is true today, God the punisher and fear-filled religion is popular, simplistic, and easy.

But what if there is another word?

This is where our reading for today in Genesis 18 comes in. What if our reading today is an intrusion of another way? Biblical scholars believe that Genesis

18 and Genesis 19 are from two different sources. Genesis 19 is older and reflects the popular and standard views of God and sin and punishment of the day. But Genesis 18 is inserted here from a different and somewhat younger source. Perhaps with our persistent, and slow reading we can see that there are two contrasting ways of understanding God and understanding what faith is all about. In a world of retribution, vengeance and an eye for an eye, is there an intrusion of grace? Here, in the very Bible itself, are two texts butting up against one another trying to figure out the truth of God.

Abraham stands before God and God stands before Abraham. They are face-to-face and Abraham says, “Are you going to sweep away an entire city, good and bad all mixed together? What if fifty good people were there? Would you not forgive the entire city if there were only fifty righteous people there?” And God says, “I will forgive the entire city for the sake of fifty righteous people.” Then Abraham goes back and forth with God over God forgiving the city, persisting in his prayer – for this is what this is – Abraham praying, haggling, contending, working, arguing, persisting with God, pleading for the forgiveness of an entire city if only a small, faithful remnant could be found within it.

Each time, Abraham says, “Far be it for you, to do such a thing!” In other words, “God, you are holy. If you do this you will profane who you are. For your sake, don’t do this. For the sake of your reputation don’t destroy the city. Instead, forgive it even if only ten righteous people could be found. Show the world that you are forgiving and long-suffering.”

This persistent and relentless prayer and dialogue between Abraham and God shifts the focus from all those who have broken the rules, to those few who

haven't. Here is a deep and fundamental shift going on before our very eyes in the history of Israel and in the Bible: Is God more concerned with keeping score or is God more concerned with saving the lost? Here is the possibility that good and faithful people have the capacity to save others and override the destructiveness of sin. In other words, is the capacity of goodness more powerful than the capacity of evil? Is God more interested in goodness and grace than God is interested in keeping the rules and punishing those deserving it?

Here in our very Bible, in Genesis 18 and 19 is a debate, an argument going on that continues throughout the Bible. Who is God and how does God respond to good and evil? What's the truth of God – the “amen” of God: judgment and punishment or loving patience and forgiveness? It is an argument within the very heart of God and in the very highest court of heaven.

“Mr. Prosecutor, state your case.”

“My Lord and my God, as I rise in the court, may I respectfully remind you, there must be judgment upon this perverse and evil people. You yourself have said through the prophet Ezekiel: ‘Doom has come upon you, upon you who dwell in the land. The time has come! The day is near! There is panic, not joy, on the mountains. I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices’” (Ezekiel 7:7-8). “Thank you, your honor.”

“Defense counsel, please rise. What say you?”

“Loving God, we plead guilty. We agree with the prosecution that humanity deserves punishment. It is true that all have sinned, every single person, and fallen short of your glory” (Rom. 3:23), “but we plead for mercy and long suffering grace. With the prayers of Abraham and Noah, Moses, David, Hosea, Jeremiah, and Isaiah and multitudes across centuries, we ask the highest court for forgiveness. Thank you, Lord.”

“Mr. Prosecutor, what say you?”

“My Lord and God, I simply quote you from the psalms, ‘God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day’ (Ps. 7:11). It’s the Bible.”

“Defense counsel?”

“But this is the Bible, too. Psalm 86:15 ‘But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness and truth.’

On and on the case is argued in heaven. On and on across the ages and on and on throughout the Bible: is there any mercy or is it about punishment?

The prosecution stands, “My Lord, there are not fifty righteous. It has been proven in this court time and time again that there are not even forty righteous, nor thirty, nor twenty, nor even ten. Indeed, Lord, we can prove there is not even one righteous. Not one. This world and these people deserve judgment. Lord, God, let’s put a stop to this once and for all.”

“You highest honor. We plead for mercy. The Defense rests.”

Then there is a voice in the back of the courtroom of heaven. God the Son says, "I am that One Righteous. I am the One, for whom forgiveness will be given."

Amen.