

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent II, March 4, 2012, dedicated to Keith White and Debbie Yontz for their wedding day, 3/3/12, to the memory of Joe DeVennish, who was buried yesterday, and always to the glory of God!

“Abraham: Spare them, Lord”

Genesis 18:22-33

**(Part III of VIII in sermon series
“Great Prayers of the Bible”)**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The second of our great prayers of the Bible belongs to Abraham. Abraham comes out of nowhere in the Book of Genesis and rises to become (in time) the father of three faiths. In his book on Abraham, Bruce Feiler tells us this about “Father” Abraham:

“He has no mother. He has no past. He has no personality. The man who will redefine the world appears suddenly, almost as an afterthought, with no trumpet fanfare, no fluttering doves, in Genesis 11:26, When Terah has lived seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

“From this a-heroic start, Abram (which in Hebrew

means "mighty father") goes on to abandon his father at age 75, leave his homeland, move to Canaan, travel to Egypt, father two sons (the first from his wife's servant and second from his wife, Sarah), change his name, circumcise himself, circumcise both his teen-ager and newborn, exile his first son and his mother, attempt to kill his second, fight a world war, buy some land, bury his wife, father an entire second family, and die at one hundred seventy-five." (Bruce Feiler, *Abraham*, Harper Collins, NY, NY, 2002, pp. 18-19).

This is what the texts of Hebrew scripture tell us about Abraham, the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The texts of the Quran give us no more background than this. ***It isn't much and it isn't noble.***

The father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is a mix of history and myth, of wandering and settling, of stranger in a strange land, of outsider who longs to be the insider, of a landless one who longs for the land, of pious man who finds his peace in one God, a peace that brings him at last to rest in God from the pains of his journey. (Feiler, p. 21).

What makes Abraham unique is that he comprehends what no other man or woman before him has "gotten." **Abraham understands that "God is one."** He is the first monotheist. While Jews have Moses, Christians have Jesus and Muslims have Muhammad. But all three of our traditions hold as special this one man who knows, who believes and who follows one God.

God's choice of Abraham is in itself very special. God needs Abraham. While humans have disappointed God over the first 20 generations of people in the biblical story, Abraham is different. God finds in Abraham someone with whom God can actually talk. God wants to be imitated. God wants to be loved. In Abraham, God has created someone who is faithful and obedient, who imitates and loves, someone who is grateful for the blessing of life.

Abraham walks with God. He leaves these footprints for us to follow. As he walks with God, we see that he doesn't simply believe in God! He BELIEVES God. He doesn't ask for proof. He provides the proof.

Generally speaking, Abraham is not particularly unique. By the time we meet him he is old. He seems unsure. He makes mistakes. In a Genesis text that is absorbed by and focused on creation, Abraham is not able to create. His story is dominated by the childlessness. It is almost as if he is so unlike the creator, that this makes him special. He is absolutely and utterly human! As such, he is completely in need of God (Feiler, pp. 22-25).

In his humanness and in sense of deep relationship with God, we meet up with Abraham in Genesis 18:22-33. God has just declared that Sodom will be wiped from the face of the earth because of Sodom's wickedness. Abraham's prayer in the aftermath of God's declaration is one that confronts God, negotiates with God and seeks to bargain with God. Abraham has a clear relationship with God and speaks out of his relationship. But he also is practical. He wants to save Sodom because it is the home of his nephew Lot. Lot is prosperous and his family is plentiful. Abraham doesn't want to lose the generations of his family now living in Sodom.

This great prayer is not a prayer like we are used to seeing. It is a daring prayer. It is a confrontational prayer. It is an intercessory prayer. It is - ultimately - a conversation between friends - but in this case one of the partners in the conversation just happens to be the Lord of the Universe. Abraham is very aware of that! He approaches God directly and says that it is unjust for God to do what is unjust to the just. He questions God's collateral damage in this decision. Does God seriously want to wipe out good people in Sodom? It would be a blemish on the Lord's story of justice and righteousness (already affected by the destruction of all but Noah's family earlier in Genesis).

“Far be it from you,” Abraham says, “that the righteous would be wiped out with the unrighteous.” So Abraham begins to negotiate for the salvation of Sodom. “What if 50 righteous people can be found in Sodom, will God spare the city?” Yes, God agrees to 50. But, Abraham is only beginning. He negotiates from 50 to 45; from 45 to 40; from 40 to 30; from 30 to 20; from 20 to 10. He knows not to go any lower than 10 because 10 is the number of Jews needed to form a minyan - through which all legitimate transactions with God happen. Through it all, Abraham is respectful of God, although at times he really pushes God to change God’s position on destroying Sodom.

The “prayer” ends with God’s promise to spare Sodom. However, Sodom isn’t able to produce even 10 righteous people. and in the end Sodom is destroyed. So, is the prayer useless? Is it meaningless?

From this great prayer we learn many things. We learn that the heart we bring to conversation with God really matters. Abraham brings a clear heart. We learn that God is willing to hear and respond to the prayers of faithful people. God is willing to be challenged and to be interactive in relation to God’s people around big issues, like justice, righteousness and destruction. We find that God seeks prayer partners, like Abraham, who is humble, who listens to God, who is obedient to God and who is responsive to God. Out of this relationship, God is open to hear and respond, as well.

All of this is a model for you and me as we enter prayer. The ingredients of following God’s call – humility, active listening and obedience – can lead to a meaningful relationship with God. In this meaningful relationship, we are called to be daring, challenging and appealing to God for justice and righteousness in God’s actions, just as God is demanding of the same for us. We also must remember that God’s mercy on the day God grants Abraham his prayerful request is not God’s final answer as the Sodomites refuse to repent and turn from their wicked ways. In the end, mercy

will not be mercy if those granted mercy refuse to truly change. God spares them, but in the end, they do not spare themselves because of their unfaithfulness.

Next week, we will explore God's forgiveness in the prayer of Moses. Amen.

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