

“The Prayer of Abraham”

Genesis 18:16-33

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One of my favorite Christian authors was an old Methodist preacher—a former chaplain to the Confederate Army—who wrote nine books on the subject of prayer. In one of them, he concluded that “Prayer, in its highest form and grandest success, assumes the attitude of a wrestler with God.” My grandmother could certainly attest to that. She died several years ago just a few months short of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday but throughout her life, she was what the old-timers would call a real “prayer warrior.” She used to pray all the time, and I don’t mean those short, dinky ones either. Well I believe her prayers THEN have something directly to do with me standing here before you, TODAY, THIS VERY MORNING. You see, when my twin brother and I came into the world 69 years ago, we were born premature with the result that our weak lungs developed double pneumonia. As a result, neither one of us was expected to live. One of the doctors suggested that my father go out and buy a couple of burial plots which he DID. But another doctor was a pious Christian and he told my parents that if they knew anybody who could pray, that they should organize a “prayer chain” for us. Well it was my grandmother who led the effort. I ALSO know that after I experienced my conversion to Christ almost a half-century ago, her prayers were at it AGAIN. She told me she prayed for me every day and she KNEW that the time would come when my heart would change and I would never again be the same. However, she must have prayed better than she REALIZED for I’m sure she never anticipated that I would end up becoming a minister just like her son, my Uncle Ron. What she taught me was that REAL prayer is actually a form of “wrestling with God,” that it refuses to take no for an answer. This morning, I want to talk to you about one of my favorite SPIRITUAL wrestlers, someone who in the annals of biblical history refused “to take no for an answer.”

In this morning’s Old Testament lesson, God—in the guise of three men, presumably angels--meets Abraham in the plains of Mamre. After receiving hospitality from him and his wife, Sarah, God informs him that due to the terrible wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, he is going to destroy both cities. Now their sins--which included murder, greed, and rape--had made those two cities a by-word for the most appalling depravity. Upon hearing this, Abraham becomes concerned. He’s anxious about his nephew Lot and his family, Lot being the son of his brother Haran, but he is also worried for OTHERS in the city, especially the innocent who would be destroyed along with the evil. And so he asks God, “Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous along with the wicked?”

As I worked on this sermon, I couldn’t help but note the irony that in the same week in which I was preaching on the destruction of the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, it also happened to be the 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki- a move that led to their surrender a few days later, effectively ending World War II. However, I found myself wondering if the same MORAL calculus that Abraham was concerned about in this morning’s text had ALSO been a consideration among those who had drawn up the plans for those bombings, or was it purely a MILITARY AND POLITICAL decision. After all, while Hiroshima remained essentially a BUDDHIST city, Nagasaki was then known as a “Christian” city where half of the Catholic population of Japan lived, around 50,000 strong, with the majority

of them concentrated in the area around ground zero. Presbyterians were not excluded for they comprised the largest PROTESTANT presence in the city followed by Episcopalians and then Methodists. Therefore, of the 75,000 victims who died in Nagasaki from the second blast, a significant percentage of them were Christians- children of God, our OWN brothers and sisters in the faith. Was there anyone like Abraham protesting on THEIR behalf as preparations were made for the destruction of THOSE two cities?

Abraham's prayer with God actually takes on the form of a negotiation although who among US seriously thinks we can negotiate with God- and WIN; who among US believes we can actually change God's mind and heart about something God has ALREADY resolved to do? Surprisingly, the Bible teaches us that God's purposes and will are NOT fixed for there are several instances where God demonstrates the "freedom" to be able to change his mind in response to our prayers. In fact, in my next sermon in this series, we will see how MOSES did precisely THAT, how he pled REPEATEDLY with God to avert his anger over the people's disobedience in the wilderness- and out of love, GOD DID!

Hence, God's power is always circumscribed and restricted by his great love for us. Even when God JUDGES, it is constrained by his compassion for as it says in the Old Testament book of Lamentations, "Though he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love"(Lam. 3:32). God created us in the FIRST place for the purpose of enjoying a loving relationship with us. For reasons only God can know, Abraham was chosen from among all the people on earth and given the promise that he would one day become the "Father of many nations" with descendants as numerous as the grains of sand on the beach. Through his posterity, the Messiah--God's own Son--would arrive and, in time, establish his kingdom among them for all eternity. To confirm that God would do what he said he would, God established a "covenant" or an agreement with him. In return, God only asked that Abraham would believe him and remain faithful to him. If Abraham was able to bargain or "wrestle" with God, it was all because of the faith and confidence he had in that covenantal relationship God had established between the two of them.

In other words, Abraham knew what it was to be a "child of God" and that children, by virtue of their relationship, ALWAYS have special access to the Father that others DON'T. Therefore he says to God, "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" When God gives in, he tries to bargain him down still FURTHER by asking if there were forty-five righteous persons, would he STILL change his mind? When God says yes, he CONTINUES to press his luck, asking if God would withhold judgment were there to be but forty and then thirty and then twenty and finally ten? To each one of his pleas, God relents and says "yes" to him again and again.

If on the basis of his covenant with Abraham, God institutes a new relationship with his creatures based on love, it ALSO marks a radical redefinition of God's sense of justice and righteousness. In the Old Testament, there are two different Hebrew words translated as "justice." The first is "mishpat" translated as "justice" or "judgment." It is a legal term that refers to STRICT justice, that is, giving each person his or her due or what it is each individual deserves for his or her actions in this world. The ethic of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a

tooth is based upon it. It is grounded in the notion that good behavior is rewarded and bad behavior or law breaking must be judged or penalized.

The second word often translated “justice” is “seddiq” or “righteousness.” The idea behind THIS word was not to judge or penalize persons for their sins or wrong-doing. Rather, it was based in mercy and generosity and for the purpose of restoring them to full fellowship after they had fallen. God’s justice was no longer about an eye for an eye but reconciling persons to himself and living in loving relationship with them. This is the NEW form that justice or righteousness now took in God’s covenantal relationship to Abraham and his lineage.

You see, God could have easily dismissed Abraham’s continuous plea for mercy and said, “These people are incorrigibly wicked and I have to give them what they truly deserve- they must DIE, EVERY LAST ONE of them!” After all, God had done it once before when he cleansed the earth with a great flood. But NOW, God acts with total compassion. He concedes to Abraham again and again, agreeing that even if there are TEN righteous persons to be found anywhere in Sodom, he would spare the city. Here we see how God is willing to go to ANY extreme if it will help reconcile him with his creation and restore them back into loving, faithful fellowship with himself. Hence, more than God’s wrath poured out upon two cities for their extreme wickedness, this story of Sodom and Gomorrah is first and foremost about how God’s justice works and how the judgments of God are always constrained by his love above all.

But there is still one OTHER point that can be made about this prayer. If on the basis of his covenantal relationship with Abraham, a relationship initiated by God himself, that Abraham now has a NEW relationship with God which is grounded in love; and if it has also led to a redefinition of God’s justice and righteousness- from one based on an eye for an eye and giving persons their due TO extending mercy and grace to persons for the purpose of restoring them back to relationship with himself, then we ALSO see here how Abraham HIMSELF has been changed by this new relationship. His concern is primarily for the well-being of OTHERS and not solely himself. Where Job prays only for HIMSELF, to convince God that he has been unfairly afflicted, ABRAHAM, on the other hand, prays for people who show themselves to be the WORST of sinners and not deserving of any mercy as well as those who may be innocent and remain faithful to God.

In other words, the same love and compassion and mercy he had received from God in this new covenantal relationship--a relationship completely undeserved--he now desires to see extended to OTHERS, to those just as undeserving as he HIMSELF has been. What we see here is the highest and most sublime form of prayer there is- to pray selflessly on behalf of others, ESPECIALLY when it is for our enemies, that they might receive the same love and grace and mercy and be our enemies no longer. It was the same prayer that Christ offered from the cross when he asked of his executioners “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” and the prayer that St. Stephen prayed in the Book of Acts when he said, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” as he was being stoned to death by Paul and the other religious leaders.

Well, that’s the story as I best understand it and I believe it has much to say to US this morning. FIRST, we are all heirs of that same covenant that God made with Abraham. As God chose Abraham to be his faithful servant, and as God elected Israel to be his obedient people, so has God chosen each of US to be his faithful and obedient children. My whole theology BEGINS with the acknowledgment that God chose me before I ever chose him, that I am a Christian minister, not because I woke up one day and thought it would an exciting profession, but because God first called

me and claimed me as God had first done to Abraham. God removed my heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh and placed his Spirit within me and gave me a new identity, and now I belong to God. All I could do was surrender myself into his hands and say, "Yes, Lord, I now belong to you." It was GOD, GOD, GOD all the way, and any decision on MY part was simply a response to God's own initiative towards me. I was certainly no more holy or righteous than anyone else but yet, God loved me, chose me, and changed me long before I ever knew or chose him. Like Jesus said to his disciples, "I chose YOU; you did not choose me."

It is the same for every one of YOU. The fact you are worshiping God in this sanctuary this morning cannot in any way be attributed to your own good sense or moral judgment. You are a Christian--a brother or sister of Jesus Christ--all because GOD PERSONALLY CHOSE YOU and not because you chose HIM- pure and simple. Your decision to live like a child of God and to unite with OTHER children of God in his Church was purely a response to his love and call and claim upon you FIRST- that is, after all, what grace is all about. And the more we discover about that love and the deeper we grow in it, the more we recognize how God had EVERYTHING to do with our salvation and we, in fact, had very little. If ANYTHING, this should humble us and make us feel MORE thankful and confident in our relationship with him so that, like Abraham, we TOO may feel we can come to God and talk to him about ANYTHING without being afraid! Of course, you still retained the freedom to refuse that love had you so chosen, free to refuse to enter in that same covenantal relationship, but your hearts were so overwhelmed with gratitude by the offer ITSELF that you found it ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE to say "NO" to it.

One of the great American clergymen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the late Richard John Neuhaus, who in the latter stages of his life converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism. In his book *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, Father Neuhaus wrote movingly about how when death comes, our Catholic-Protestant doctrinal differences about 'justification by faith alone' will melt away. He said:

"When I come before the judgment throne, I will plead the promise of God in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. I will not plead any work I have done, although I will thank God that he has enabled me to do some good. I will plead no merits other than the merits of Christ, knowing that the merits of Mary and the saints are all from him; and for their company, their example, and their prayers through my earthly life I will give everlasting thanks. I will not plead that I had faith, for sometimes I was unsure of my faith, and in any event that would be to turn faith into a meritorious work of my own. I will not plead that I held the correct understanding of 'justification by faith alone,' although I will thank God that he led me to know ever more fully the great truth that this much misunderstood doctrine was intended to protect. Whatever little growth in holiness I have experienced, whatever strength I have received from the company of the saints, whatever understanding I have attained of God and his ways...these and all other gifts I will bring gratefully to the throne. But in seeking entry to that heavenly kingdom, I will, with Dymas, look to Christ and Christ alone."

SECOND, when you realize that you are now God's child, it brings with it a complete change of perspective, a whole new outlook. The fact is that nothing in life can ever seem the same after that- your heart is expanded, your sympathies become enlarged, and that same grace that you received, you also want to share with others. When Abraham thought of Sodom, he didn't first see the overwhelming sin of that city but rather men and women who ALSO had the possibility of

receiving God's grace and becoming righteous sons and daughters just like HIMSELF. If there was grace for HIM, there had to be more than enough grace for THEM, as WELL.

By extension, as children of God who have experienced God's grace in our OWN lives, we, like Abraham, are now obligated to see the rest of the world through that VERY SAME lens. We are now confronted by the fact that EVERYONE we meet, in fact I'll go so far as to say that EVERYONE WHOM WE SHARE THE AIR OF THIS SAME PLANET WITH is NO DIFFERENT than the inhabitants of that city on behalf of whom Abraham begged and plead mercy for and NO DIFFERENT than you or I once were. All Christian evangelism is based upon the premise that we're all God's creatures who are constantly being confronted with the possibility of redemption, the chance to start all over again with a fresh, clean slate REGARDLESS of how base and corrupt our OWN past actions may have been. WE are all STILL children of God and thus capable of being redeemed, capable of experiencing new life, new love, new hope, and new joy. Therefore, we have no right to scorn or be contemptuous of ANYONE in this world for to look down upon one person- in his or her lusts or addictions or selfishness or pain is to actually look upon OURSELVES and see what it was each of US once were. Like Christ, we TOO are compelled to see others, not for what they were but for what they CAN BECOME once they've encountered and experienced God's love and forgiveness THEMSELVES.

And THIRD, this story raises perhaps the most important question of ALL: how many persons must God have loved before he sent his only-begotten son to die for them? At what point do you think God might have said to himself, "You know, there's got to be a billion people or at least a million individuals worth saving if I'm going to send Jesus to die for these people. I've done the cost-benefit analysis and I won't sacrifice my son unless it is truly worth it to me." Well, how many people do you think that was to God? If there were a million or half a million souls needing to be saved, do you think THAT would be enough? How about a hundred thousand? Maybe fifty thousand? Or how about ten thousand? Do you think he would have sent Jesus if only a THOUSAND persons needed to be redeemed? Or let's get REALLY ridiculous- if there were a HUNDRED that needed to know the love of God, do you think he would have sent Jesus into the world? Let's take it one step further- how about fifty, or twenty, or perhaps TEN! Do you think God would have allowed his son to be born and then executed at the hands of his own creation if only FIVE individuals were lost and in need of God's grace? Do you think the death of the son of God would have been worth the soul of three or perhaps even just ONE person? Well let me tell you the answer is YES, YES a THOUSAND times yes!

You see, God can never love Jesus ANY MORE than he loves US and that is a FACT! We tell ourselves over and over, and WRONGLY SO, that because Jesus was God's SON and a member of the godhead--the Holy Trinity--that God the Father HAD to have loved Jesus Christ--his ONLY-BEGOTTEN Son--INFINITELY more than he could ever love such proud and selfish and disobedient creatures as OURSELVES. We somehow believe that we're too bad, too corrupt, too damaged for God to EVER care for the likes of someone like us when the truth is just the OPPOSITE, that God can never love Jesus ANY MORE than he loves the lowliest person on earth- and that includes you and me! Let me repeat it once more to allow it time to sink in...God can never love Jesus ANY MORE than he loves the VILEST HUMAN BEING, the WORST CRIMINAL ever to walk this earth- and that includes ANY OF US. And friends, if that be TRUE, and it IS, then the corollary to that is that had the ENTIRE WORLD been righteous and there was yet just ONE individual left who needed forgiveness and to know how

great God loved him or her, then God would have sent Jesus into the world to die FOR JUST THAT ONE INDIVIDUAL, even if that lone person had been YOU or it had been ME! Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, in your servant Abraham, you have given us insight into the heart of a truly great man. May his example of faith and compassion and humility inspire us to demonstrate a SIMILAR faith and courage as we go about OUR lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*