

“The Gift of Conversation”

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Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Luke 16:1-13 and Genesis 18:16-33

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Luke 16:1-13

Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” Then the Lord said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”

So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 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?” And the Lord said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” Again he spoke to God, “Suppose forty are found there.” God answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” Then Abraham said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” He said, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” (This sounds like an argument at home, doesn’t it?) He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” Then Abraham said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” God answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” And the lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Genesis 18:16-33

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we reflect upon, wrestle with, open our hearts to the living Word. May we let it live and not be closed within us this day. Amen.

This passage from Genesis is part of several chapters filled with intriguing and challenging stories. What I read this morning comes immediately after the passage that was read last week about Abraham and Sarah learning that they are to have a son. We talked about the fact that it wasn't really clear if it was a vision or a visit because in the beginning, Abraham hears God speaking, then suddenly turns to welcome strangers to the table. The message they bring about giving birth makes Sarah laugh out loud. Then God appears again and challenges Sarah, telling her that with God all things are possible. If you keep on reading after this passage, you will find that the strangers of the visit with Abraham head out to the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah and are soon referred to as angels. When they arrive at the town, they are offered hospitality by a man named Lot. Later townsfolk come to the door wanting to see, to know the strangers. And Lot, in a very strange move, offers them his daughters instead. Then the focus moves to the destruction of Sodom with the angel visitors helping Lot and his family escape. The connecting bridge between that part of the story and last week's story is this conversation between God and Abraham.

I always think when you prepare for a sermon on Genesis, especially passages as complex as these, it's smart to read the work of Walter Brueggemann who used to teach at Eden Seminary. He doesn't see this story in isolation but as woven together with the others in Genesis. He says as we move from Abraham and Sarah to the destruction of Sodom, we can hear parallels to the story of Noah wherein God tells Noah and his family how to escape the flood waters, paralleling Sodom and the angels who help Lot and his family escape. But before Brueggemann explores this conversation between Abraham and God, he talks about the possible reasons for the destruction of Sodom. He says that many view it as a condemnation of homosexuality because of the use of the word "to know" in Hebrew in a way that implies intimacy in the passage regarding the townsfolk. But Brueggemann says not to fast. The same word here--*ya-da*--in Hebrew is the same root of the word used in this morning's passage and later on when God talks about knowing. When townsfolk arrive at Lot's house because they want to know the visitors, Lot offers them his daughters.

Rather than looking at this story in isolation, Brueggemann challenges us to see that we need to look at the larger context to get a better sense of what's going on. He lists other Bible passages that refer to Sodom and God's anger. In Isaiah the people are condemned for their lack of justice. In Jeremiah it is irresponsible behaviors. The prophet Ezekiel condemns Sodom for the sins of pride, excessive consumption of food and, most of all, their indifference to those in need. So Brueggemann shows us the challenge and the danger of using one particular word and reading it literally. He says, instead, if we believe in the living word, we need to approach it with an open mind.

Rabbi Sacks in his book, *Not in God's Name*, says "*fundamentalism is when one goes straight from revelation to application without interpretation and that's dangerous.*" He says these ancient texts were directed to times and conditions quite unlike our own. He refers to the book of Joshua where "*warfare was systemic and brutal and the massacre of entire populations was commonplace. Things justified in one time may be wholly unjustified in others.*" He said *the issue is how to apply the world then to the world now, bridging the hermeneutical abyss of time and change*" -- don't worry, I had to look up the precise meaning of hermeneutical. It's "the science of interpretation most often applied to scriptures." Sacks says "*fundamentalism without interpretation ignores the simple most important fact about a sacred text, namely that its meaning is not always self-evident, that we need to engage in covenantal listening to God's word,*" not to approach it with an either-or frame of mind but looking at the larger picture.

So with all that said, let's go back to the conversation between God and Abraham. Brueggemann maintains this passage was probably inserted later on as a theological reflection of the events that took place in Sodom. In this conversation we witness the relationship between God and humanity as one that is very

different from other gods with a small “g”. Traditional gods with a small “g” talked about in the scriptures are those of idol worship and reflect a pattern of asking for and receiving favors. If I do this, you’ll do that kind of relationship. But this is a different kind of conversation, one in which God is not the creator who imposes all things upon people on a whim, but a relationship of give and take, of conversation and relationship, of questions and answers flowing back and forth in mutual respect and dialogue. What intrigued me was the way this passage begins. It begins with God basically asking the question, “Should I tell Abraham what I’m going to do? Or should I keep it to myself?” It feels so odd. So often we as humans think, well, maybe we can hide something from God. But God wants to hide this from Abraham. It’s as if God knows exactly what Abraham might argue if Abraham gets wind of it. And indeed, just as God suspected, when Abraham does find out, the questions come flying back. It feels in some ways like a deliberate contrast to God challenging Sarah for laughing.

Now Abraham challenges God. Abraham expresses his concern for the faithful still in Sodom. He is the bearer of “a new theological possibility” and he dares to ask risky questions, encouraging God to set aside the closed system of tit for tat and approach the world in another way with both justice and righteousness, grace and mercy. Abraham challenges God to consider justice and righteousness with the same moral tone as God expresses anger toward the behavior of the unjust in Sodom. As Brueggemann said, *“Abraham pushes God to value the righteous more than craving the destruction of the unrighteous”*.

But note that Abraham’s words are not tossed at God in an arrogant manner. He doesn’t act like someone on Face Book who is angry and tells everybody exactly what they think and why the others are wrong. Abraham does challenge Yahweh, but with deference and respect. So the question we might consider is this: Is the conversation about Abraham trying to change God’s mind, or in this conversation are we as the hearers of the word being presented with new insight about who God is or might be? Remember the root meaning of the word of the name for God in Hebrew is the most ambiguous yet powerful, fluid, hard-to-pin-down phrase...I am who I am, I will be who I will be. In the midst of the movement towards the destruction of Sodom, the question is asked: “if there is to be justice, and what is the role of righteousness and grace?”

I have always been drawn to this passage for a number of reasons. One is that it opens the door to saying that questions of faith are okay, that doubt can be a normal part of what it means to grow in wisdom and understanding, that God likes our questions far more than our apathy. So as I approached the passage this week, I thought the focus would be on the dangers of literalism, to the question of seeing faith as only a catechism of questions and answers to be answered correctly and believed precisely. But it’s more than that. While I was on the internet this week, a pastor wrote on the church’s website something that really touched me. *We are rooted firmly in the Reformed tradition*, he said about his church. *Growing to joyfully face the challenges of a world so in need of Christ’s teaching, love and grace. A church where your doubts are respected, your questions are taken seriously, where you are encouraged to participate and where you can make a difference.* His words remind me that when we are willing and encouraged to wrestle with the questions, we grow. I hope we are a community where questions are honored and growth is encouraged and doubts are not seen as moments of unfaithfulness but as possibilities for moving toward new understanding.

But the Spirit moves and as I sat before this passage, another great challenge came to the forefront. What I found for me to be the harder part. Maybe Abraham’s questions are not just an example of the covenantal relationship of God. Maybe this conversation is a reminder that as people of faith, we must speak truth to power, that faith calls us to speak up and speak out when things happen that are not just or right. The image of Abraham speaking to God about matters of the heart and the faith tells me to ask myself when have I witnessed to needs, to responses, to issues that need to be questioned or challenged? When I am presented with those situations, do I have the courage to do it? Abraham is a witness who speaks that punishment for unfaithfulness cannot be the whole story. That it must stand in tension with justice, mercy and grace. Abraham reminds us that as people of the word we must not only advocate for ourselves but for

others, that faith means we don't walk through life accepting everything that happens, that we must be willing to ask questions and to honor the needs of others when they become apparent to us. There are times when we need to challenge one another to reconsider or turn back. And there is more. Maybe we are reminded not only do we need to have the courage of Abraham to confront others. But also to confront ourselves. Maybe we are not just to remember the example of Abraham and ask the questions, but that the voice of Abraham is speaking to us, asking you or me these questions about how moments of anger or viewpoints that may be expressed in unjust ways are not right. Maybe this the conversation is one we are called to have with ourselves periodically when we face situations when we have the power and the ability to impact others. To remind ourselves that there are times when we need to ask *Is this faithful? Is this right? Does this honor God and the promise of justice shaped by grace? Is what I am planning to do something that will work towards righteousness and peace?* Amen.

Quotes from the book *Genesis*, by Walter Brueggemann, part of the Interpretation Bible Series, and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks book, *Not in God's Name*.