God’s Will Be Done (or Not)

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 2019

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

*When you pray, say: Father, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who has wronged us. And don’t lead us into temptation.*

*Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer*

When I was a student studying philosophy at UH, I encountered the writings of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle. Among his many concepts that influenced western culture, philosophers and theologians was his understanding of God. Aristotle described God as the Unmoved Mover. God, he wrote, was the creator of the universe, and once creation was done, God retreated from the world. Thus the Unmoved Mover, a creator who has nothing to do with what goes on in the world. That’s a vast oversimplification, of course, but you get the idea.

Later on, during the period known as the Enlightenment, another variation of Aristotle’s thinking gained popularity. Philosophers in that period, who were called Deists, began to describe the Creator as the Divine Clockmaker. Simply put, God created the world like a clockmaker, wound it up when he finished, and let it go. From that moment on, the clock/universe operated independently of the clockmaker/creator.

This understanding of God paints a portrait of God unphased by the affairs of the world. We’re on our own here, folks. God will not interfere in the affairs of the world. To appeal to divine intervention is futile. God just does not care and will not intervene in any way.

No such God appears in the Bible. In the two passages selected by the lectionary we find a God to whom we may appeal and to whom we can pray. The first focuses our attention once again on father Abraham in one of the most intriguing passages in all the Bible. This story occurs immediately following the visit of the three men we visited last Sunday. After their encounter with Abraham, they set off for Sodom. The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah have become the stuff of legend and diatribes by preachers, conservative and progressive. God sets about to destroy these cities in righteous indignation.

This is where we pick up the story. Abraham, having gained knowledge of God’s intentions, bargains with God. What if there are fifty innocent people in the city? Will you still destroy it? Forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? No, no, no, no, no, and no, God replied.

Before we proceed further, let’s clear up some misunderstandings about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah. Infamous towns.  Why God wanted to destroy the city as reported in the Hebrew text has to do with several specific events. Prevalent among them are sadistic cruelty to beggars and visitors, murder, and greed. We saw last week how seriously the Jewish faith took hospitality and treating the stranger and the most vulnerable in their midst. The other reason the Hebrew texts tell us that Sodom was eventually destroyed was because of homosexual rape. Not, mind you, homosexual **acts**, but specifically **rape**. This is what happens shortly after the story of Abraham and God talking about how many people to save in Genesis 18:20–32. To use this story as justification for the condemnation of homosexuality is a misreading of the text.

           God sends two angels to Sodom to check out the bad rumors. They are welcomed by Lot. Some men of Sodom surround the house and demand that the strangers be given to them so that they can be “intimate” with them. That’s **not** about homosexuality; it’s about **raping** a stranger. We are, I hope, all aware in this day and age that rape has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with violent crime. Lot refuses, and the rest, as they say, is history. Sodom, by the way, is derived from a Hebrew word meaning "burnt," and Gomorrah from a word meaning "buried," references to their destruction. Having said this, I want us to look more closely at what this story tells us about the character of God. What kind of God does this encounter reveal?

The reason I shared Aristotle’s idea of the Unmoved Mover and the Enlightenment’s Divine Clock Maker is that it is a stark contrast to the God revealed in this story. God, as we see here, is not some detached machine maker, but a God who cares about individual creatures. The God of our faith cares about the sparrow, delights in each flower in the field, and knows the hair on each of our heads.

That God and Abraham should care about a single human life is more than pure sentiment. It means that a single human life is more important than the aggregate, the generic group, the nation. "I don’t love 'groups,'” said the great philosopher Hannah Arendt. I can only love persons.  In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, what we hear is the emphasis on individual lives, individual souls, singular stories. The labels we use to separate and divide ourselves may be the last thing we need: suppose there is no such generic as “Republican” or “Liberal” or “Fundamentalist” or, here’s a good one — “Terrorist.” We are called as followers of Jesus, not to view people by category, stereotype, race, ethnicity, nationality, or any other grouping, but by one only: neighbor. And we saw a few weeks ago how seriously Jesus took our treatment of the neighbor. This brief dialogue between Abraham and God shows how seriously God values the individual.

The other thing that leapt out to me in this dialogue is how seriously God takes our petitions. Let me tread lightly here, because we can fall prey to a lot of bad theology here. But think about it. God lets Abraham know that he will destroy these two cities. Abraham rejoins, whoa now. What if there are 50 innocent persons in the two cities? Will you destroy them? No, for the sake of the fifty, I will spare the city. Then the bargaining begins. In this middle eastern culture, in that moment in history, bargaining occurs everywhere and in all things. It is how commerce is run. It is how it is run even today. Is what we have here simply Abraham trying to bargain with God, and God, in turn, knowing what will happen in the end without revealing the outcome to Abraham? No, I don’t think so. I believe God is sincere: if you can show me one innocent individual, I, God, will change my mind.

This has a tremendous impact on how and why I pray. God listens, is capable of changing the divine will, and granting what we ask for. Jesus’ teachings in the gospel reading for the day reinforces this understanding of prayer. Luke’s abbreviated version of what we call the Lord’s Prayer falls into the Jewish way of prayer: adulation and adoration followed by petitions. This version in Luke is probably more like the way Jesus actually taught than Matthew’s version, the one we historically repeat from memory most every Sunday. But what I want to call your attention to is the two short parables Jesus offers to help us understand prayer. In the first, a man is paid an unexpected visit in the middle of the night by a friend. The host is unprepared and goes to a friend’s home to loan him some provisions so he can feed his visitor. Jesus observes that while the one who is called upon to lend aid answered negatively, he changed his mind, not simply because of friendship, but will respond positively because of the *shamelessness* of the request.

In the second parable, Jesus offers another image. He says how many fathers would give their child a snake when she asks for a fish. This is the rabbinical practice of hyperbole, offering a ridiculous contrast to make a point. But the lesson Jesus gives is found in the final sentence: *if you who are unrighteous know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give* ***the Holy Spirit*** *to those who ask him? [Luke 11:13]*

This is the difficult lesson about prayer. Jesus does not teach that we will receive whatever we want or ask God for. What God offers is the Holy Spirit. What that means to me is that when we are granted the gift of the Holy Spirit, we live in the fullness of the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit fills us and we live in the full embrace of God’s holy influence, what Paul calls ***being in Christ***. When the child in Jesus’ parable asks for a fish, the child is asking to be fed. The father will not give a snake, something that will harm the child, but something that will nourish him. In the same way, when we pray, we may ask God for something we want, and God responds with giving us what we need, at that moment in time. Prayer does mean God grants everything our hearts desire. God loves us and realizes that sometimes what we ask for is a snake, destructive and poisonous.

Both these parables help us understand how God responds to our prayer. All of us, no matter if you are the most devoted follower of Christ or a nominal one, have petitioned God for something, someone, a prayer repeated over and over that seems to go unanswered. Why does God not do as God has seemingly promised*? Ask, and you will receive,* Jesus promised*.* And yet the void of unmet expectation yawns before us, disappointing us, causing our faith to falter or grow bitter, especially if it is great importance to us.

The truth of the matter is that God knows better than we what we need and is more than glad to offer it. God gives us the Spirit, and when we receive and live in the Holy Spirit, what we truly need becomes clearer and we are glad to receive it. It is at this moment that we can truly pray as Jesus encourages, *Your will be done, on earth as it is in your kingdom.* May it be so.