



'Haggling with God'

Lectionary 17 – Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
8:30 & 10:45 am, July 24, 2016
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[Genesis 18:20-32](#); [Psalm 138](#); [Luke 11:1-13](#)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

For the last few weeks, our family has been assembling items for a yard sale, which we held yesterday. It's been years since we sponsored one, and I rarely frequent yard sales (I have enough "stuff" and wish to dispense of it—why would I want anyone else's "stuff"?). So, being somewhat of a novice, I wasn't certain I'd be adept at the "haggling" part. You know, where you've listed one price, the customer comes back with an offer, and you find some point in-between? No matter what side of the counter I am on, I am not by nature a haggler. I see the sticker price and tend to pay it.

Maybe that's due to my experience years ago on my honeymoon, when Randy and I took a Disney cruise, and disembarked for a day at Nassau. Everyone told us about the Straw Market we'd encounter as soon as we touched land, and that it was customary to haggle for anything. We entered the market, surrounded by tourists, sellers, and a vast array of kitschy tropical items, most of which I didn't want. But there was this large straw tote bag calling my name—well, not exactly—but it was pretty, and I thought it would be useful. So I approached the seller, asked the price, and the haggling began. We went back and forth, back and forth. Nicely. Politely. Or so I thought. I walked away once, and the lady called out a lower price. I attempted to look discerning, then agreed to the re-negotiated cost. As I handed her the money, and she handed me the tote bag, she muttered "Some people would sell their soul to save 5 dollars..."

I guess "haggling" says to me that someone gains and the other loses. That the someone whose final offer sticks is the one who ultimately "gets their way." Doesn't matter that the straw tote bag was actually mass produced and probably cost much, much less to make than the price I haggled down to—I still felt victorious in the haggling battle, at least until the seller got the final word.

Our theme today is "Haggling with God." Considering we have an Old Testament lesson that details a rather vigorous discussion between Abraham and God, and a gospel reading where Jesus encourages persistence in prayer, we might be tempted to see prayer as "haggling" in the sense I've just described: Someone wins and someone loses. Someone ultimately "gets their way" by systematically wearing the other one down until they cry "Uncle!" and give up.

Except there are some distinct problems with this kind of interpretation. First, if we read these passages and believe prayer is a way to wear God down till God fulfills our wishes, we seriously misunderstand the very nature of God that is so clearly demonstrated

through scripture, both in the Old Testament and in the person of Jesus. Second, if we read these passages and believe that, through prayer, we will receive exactly what we want, naturally we will be devastated when our prayers don't seem to "work." We will then be convinced we didn't pray hard enough or have enough faith, or we will wonder if God really cares. I believe those are wrong conclusions to reach. Let's look at our readings...

Abraham has this vigorous conversation with the Lord God about the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, pleading with the Lord to let go of his anger at their faithlessness, and turn away from plans to destroy the towns. He goes back and forth with God about the number of righteous, faithful town residents necessary to prevent final destruction. I admit the story looks for all the world as if Abraham tries to wear God down, 5 or 10 righteous persons at a time: "Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five? ...Suppose forty are found there? ...Suppose thirty are found there?... Suppose twenty are found there?..."

And so on, until the conversation abruptly ends with God promising to save the cities if 10 righteous people might be found. Yes, we can interpret this as the Lord God Almighty being a ruthless actuary, debating with an equally ruthless Abraham, simultaneously crunching the numbers to determine a people's fate.

Or instead, we can see in Abraham's words a trust in the ultimate faithfulness of God to the creation he has made, and a belief that righteousness always overcomes evil. The Lord God has made incredible promises of blessing to Abraham and his family. And so Abraham is utterly convinced that this great God will find a way to take a terrible situation and bring about the good. Even as God remains beyond our full understanding, his actions clothed in mystery, Abraham nevertheless believes this goodness and righteousness are, in fact, the nature of God. And they will prevail.

What we witness in that story is the kind of relationship the Lord God and Abraham have. The kind of relationship that allows for vigorous, honest, and constant conversation. The kind of relationship that undergirds Abraham, enabling him to trust the Lord God, and follow him, even into an unknown future.

That's the kind of relationship God wants **us** to have with him.

And Jesus expresses that same idea as he teaches his disciples how to pray. After offering the disciples simple petitions to pray each day (petitions that form the very prayer we will pray in a little while—our Lord's Prayer), Jesus goes on to paint a picture for his friends: Suppose a man has a neighbor who comes at midnight, begging for 3 loaves of bread to feed a guest who's just arrived. Problem is, it's late. The front door is locked, and everyone is a-bed. So the man refuses, but the neighbor insists and persists. Eventually the man gives his neighbor the 3 loaves of bread that are needed. Again, much like the story of Abraham and God, we may be tempted to see this man as a symbol for God who grudgingly gives to us only if we nag him long enough. But having persistence in prayer (as Jesus encourages) is not the same as nagging. Rather, the neighbor seems to know the character of the man whose house he has approached at midnight to ask for bread. He trusts his neighbor will respond to his need. This persistence is based on that inherent trust.

The reason I think we need to see that story in such a way is because of the words of Jesus that follow. Jesus next offers a comparative about prayer. He takes the relationship of parent to child, recognizing that most parents care about the best interests of that child. So he asks, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, 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!"

Again, these are words that reiterate the nature of God in a comparative fashion. If we human beings, who often make mistakes or fail, are still capable of being good and caring parents to our children, how much more will God respond to us, his beloved children, with his goodness and care? Jesus wants us to trust in this God, as Abraham did centuries earlier. Jesus wants us to trust in this God who loves the creation he has made, and who responds to our prayer by actively working graciously and mysteriously in our lives.

Maybe the problem, as we first read these stories, is that we try to turn prayer into some formulaic moment. A skill to practice until we succeed in doing it "just right." We forget to see prayer as a continuous way of **being** with the One who unconditionally loves us even though we can't do things "just right."

I realize these lessons don't answer all our questions about prayer, about how God answers prayer, and about those times when the answer we seek doesn't seem to come. I suspect that this side of the kingdom you and I will continue to wrestle with the mystery of faith, and the mystery of the Holy One who came down in the person of Jesus to meet us.

But this is what I believe: We are not asked to haggle in order to wear God down and get what we want. (You know, the squeaky wheel gets the grease.) Instead, we are encouraged to live each day in this ongoing relationship with our God, trusting he is the One who truly knows what we need. **AMEN.**

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