



## “Haggling with God”

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
8:15 and 11:00 a.m., Sunday, July 24, 2016  
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13

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

In my first congregation I had the opportunity to go down to South America to Guatemala to learn how to speak Spanish. The neighborhood that we were in had about twenty-three per cent who were Latinos and as the new pastor I thought it might be a good idea to learn how to speak to about a quarter of the population who happened to be in my community. And so I took some classes first in Queens and then I went down to Guatemala for a whole month of intensive Spanish. I lived with a Guatemalan family and then I took for about six hours every day one on one instruction. In the time that we had off we were able to just kind of walk around the city that we were in, it was Antigua, Guatemala, an ancient capital, actually one of the first capitals of the new world, that would be like North and South America.

As you're walking around there are people selling food and selling various wares and crafts, and one of the things that I noticed right away were these beautiful stoles, like the one that I am wearing right now. They were made by Indian women indigenous that probably came originally from a Mayan culture. If you wanted to buy anything at these little set-ups that they had along the streets, you had to realize that the price that they said anything was, was not really the final price. Well let's put it this way, it didn't have to be the final price. There was an expectation in that culture that you would barter a little bit, that you would haggle over the price and then come down to a price that both people could live with. It was actually quite a lot of fun after a while because you found that the language that was used was always the same no matter who you were talking to. And you would get into this great little sparing match with the person trying to sell in this case the stoles. I remember vividly talking to these women who had made these, they would hold it up and say, *oh muy buen trabajo*, very good work, *un buen precio*, I am going to give you a good price, and then they would say something that was over what you really needed to say and so you would go back and forth until you could finally agree to whatever the price was. After four weeks I got pretty good at doing all of this, and I also was able to see the different quality in the workmanship depending on who actually had made it.

Of course that's not the only haggling that I learned how to do. I learned how to haggle with God quite early on. It was fifth grade, my teacher decided to do a pop quiz on something she had told us to read the day before. I however had neglected to read what she wanted us to read and so I decided to haggle with God. Right at the moment that the quiz was being handed out, *Dear God, save me from this time of trial. I promise that I will study harder and I will never have this happen again.* But believe it or not, it actually worked out okay. The questions were easier than I thought they were going to be, but I was able in

prayer to work that out with God and I don't know if somehow magically the questions changed or it was all questions that I was able to get, but I'll take what I can get.

Haggling is a part of Middle Eastern culture as well as Mediterranean culture. It's expected for business transactions as it is for many other places around the world, and we have a wonderful, wonderful story in the book of Genesis about Abraham haggling with God.

Now a little pre-story, in the chapter before Abraham at the age 99 had visitors come to speak with him and said you are going to be the father of many nations. Given God has made a covenant with Abraham, a covenant, a relationship, that he and all of his descendants are going to be God's chosen ones. These visitors who delivered the message, they might be angels or they might be the Lord himself, now have decided to travel from where Abraham is and now go into two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah to execute God's justice on those people.

Now what was the great sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, you probably are thinking something that is probably not correct, but there are a lot of different options. Sodom and Gomorrah come up in scripture a couple times before this incident. They had been engaged in a war so no doubt there were all sorts of atrocities that were committed on both sides. There was violence and inhumanity that often comes with conflict and war. These particular people in five cities in that region, also was a fertile valley at that time near the dead sea, it's not that way now. At that time, it would have been a fertile valley, so who knows if there was greed involved in the peoples. And this was really before the Jewish faith takes off as we know it. And so the people of that region were followers of Moab, boy that sounds bad doesn't it? And it was bad because one of the aspects of that faith was child sacrifice. So that if it got a little dry out like it has been recently here, and you wanted a little good rain, sometimes they would sacrifice their own children.

Of course, later we know that there are men that were going to want to do violence against these visitors who go into the city, so that is a basic violation of a very important principle in Middle Eastern culture, the violation of the stranger. Whenever someone came into your midst as a stranger, you were obligated to take care of them and the men in the city want to do them harm, perhaps even rape.

So, there's a lot of things that are wrong with Sodom and Gomorrah. And so God like a good judge wants to go down into those two cities. He wants to collect evidence, he wants to see what is happening because God is a God of justice and fairness. A God who wants to make things right, and so he's calling for justice on Sodom and Gomorrah.

There's a wonderful exchange that occurs, as Abraham seemingly blocks God's way of these visitors, these men who are going down into the city. Now Israelite judges were expected to equit the righteous and condemn the wicked. Judges were expected to only give justice to those who actually deserved it, and so Abraham who also believes in a just God is concerned that the righteous will be not given proper warning and a chance to leave the community before it's destroyed. He wants to save them from the fire and brimstone, the people who are in those towns who are leading good lives, even the unrighteous could be spared for the sake of the righteous. So Abraham's question is quite simple "*Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?*" And then he speaks to God's very character

himself. *“Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?”* You see, Abraham is assuming that God's executing justice will be so complete that he will destroy the unrighteous and the righteous. In other words, Abraham's concern is that God will not do what is right, and so he appeals to God's mercy. After all, he knows that this God has just established a covenant with him is a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and so we see this wonderful rich haggling, this negotiation that happens between the two of them. Almost like a modern day negotiation that we might have in a business.

The first thing that we need to realize is in this negotiation God has already established a covenant with Abraham. They are building on that relationship that was established only one chapter ago, how important that is in any negotiation to build on the relationship that the two companies already have. But it's also important for Abraham to know what he wants and quite frankly what he wants is to save his family. He has family members who are in Sodom and he wants to make sure that they get out. Lot and his family, he wants God to be merciful because he wants his family saved. But Abraham must also know what God wants, and what God wants simply is justice. As he sees these two communities act in ways that are not in accord with God's will. So Abraham has to think big in the same way that you're negotiating a stole, they throw out a large number and then I throw out a small number and we try to meet somewhere in the middle. He has to think big, and what he wants to do is he wants to save those righteous especially his family. And so to do that he's going to be bold.

This man who has just established a covenant with God is going to be bold by haggling with the Lord Almighty, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Think about the situation, the set-up to this, and he does it by being persistent. Notice how he works God down. Well if you find fifty righteous in these two cities; certainly you're not going to destroy everybody. God says no, I won't destroy everybody. Ah so, how about forty-five? What about forty, or thirty, or twenty? God the creator of the heavens and the earth, God of mercy, what about ten? And God relents. This persistence of Abraham is the same kind of persistence that Jesus will teach years and years later. Search and ye will find. Knock and the door will be open, ask and you will receive an answer. After all the goal of any negotiation or haggling is that both parties feel that they have won, that they have what they want. And isn't that the God we worship? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Joseph, the God who raised Jesus from the dead delights in us, delights in the relationship that he wants to establish with us. The covenant of his chosen people, the psalmists cry out for the Lord know he is high, he will guard the lowly.

This haggling exchange teaches us something very important about our relationship with God. Our God is a God of compassion as well as a God of justice. But also notice that God is okay with being challenged. When we pour out our hearts to him, when we feel that life is unjust, recognize it is a normal part of our faith tradition going all the way back to the Bible. We do not just worship a God who on high says, this is what I tell you to do, it is an active growing relationship of speaker and listener and speaker and listener. And notice in this moment God can even change his mind. That's what happens when you're in relationship, after all. When you're in relationship with another person, you're in conversation with them about hopes and dreams, about what you want and about what they want, it's about that negotiation and haggling with one another. It's about building relationship. And notice too,

that Abraham haggles not on what he wants, but he's doing it for someone else, for Lot and his family.

So who or what do you want to haggle with God about. Maybe it's the health of a loved one, or freedom from addiction and sin. Perhaps it's wanting to speak to God about the welfare of a person, or seeking peace in a world of violence, or maybe it's seeking God to be active in the mission of this congregation and challenging both ourselves and God for something different and something better.

This haggling comes natural to Jesus as well for he offers us a way to talk to God in the Lord's Prayer. He calls his disciples to be people of prayer and to build on that real relationship, even taking on the name that Jesus uses himself. He says to you and to me when you speak to God, say Father, Daddy, Abba. The words that I use in prayer I give to you. The relationship that I have with my father should be the relationship that you have with your father and God. This God is a holy God. One who gives us the kingdom of heaven and makes it real in our world today whose will is holy. But this is also a generous God who gives us our daily bread. Who helps satisfy the needs that we have for the day, but also a God who forgives, who is generous in his mercy to us, for this God is our Savior who showers upon us saving grace again, and again, and again. Who leads us away from temptation and sin and calls us into new life.

So brothers and sisters don't be afraid to speak to God. Don't be afraid to haggle with God. Go to him. Speak with him. The spirit of God is in you and the Lord will fulfill his purposes for you. Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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