



GRAPPLING WITH GOD: ABRAHAM

July 14, 2019, Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18:16-33

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

I am a lousy negotiator. Before I went to seminary I spent a little time working with Central American refugees in Mexico. There were many challenges but the hardest one for me was engaging in basic commerce. In an economic culture where bartering over the price of things was considered an essential and expected element of interaction, I was incredibly uncomfortable. I did not want to offend by suggesting too low a price and I did not want to look foolish starting with too high a price. I just wanted the entire interaction done, clean and simple. And I am the same way to this day. Just the thought of walking into a car dealership gives me the heebie-jeebies.

Our text this morning brings us face to face with perhaps the single greatest negotiation in all of human history. Abraham and God negotiating for the survival of a city. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks refers to this exchange as “some of the most audacious words in the history of faith.”¹

Today is the first sermon in a three sermon series entitled, “Grappling with God.” These sermons will be looking at intimate and intense interactions between God and Abraham, Moses and Jesus. In looking at these texts we will seek to gain greater insight into the nature of our prayer life with the divine. In other words, what do these texts have to teach us about how *we* can pray?

We are off to a rollicking start with Abraham continually challenging God as he seeks to save the city of Sodom from destruction. Biblical Scholar Terry Fretheim refers to this text as “intercessory dialogue.” He clearly must be a master of understatement. But I think Fretheim rightly describes Abraham’s approach later



in his writings when he says Abraham “is blunt, persistent, and non-traditional.”² Indeed.

Learning of God’s plan to destroy Sodom, Abraham asks God a question, or perhaps what should be said is he challenges God with a series of questions. “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are 50 righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the 50 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?”

Abraham has the audacity to question God’s plans and to even dare to remind God of who God is and therefore how God should act. Cue the lightning bolt now. But no, God listens and agrees to Abraham’s challenging request. It is a remarkable and jaw-dropping moment. But Abraham is not done. Hey God, how about if there are forty-five righteous, forty, thirty, twenty, ten. And with each ever more audacious request, God agrees. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says this, “It is the birth of one of the great Jewish traditions: the argument with Heaven, for the sake of Heaven, the covenantal dialogue between God and humanity in the name of justice.”³

So how did we get to this place that God can be continually swayed to change God’s plan through relentless bargaining? It is as if God is a used car salesman worn down by a pushy and persistent customer. But let us turn to something that is said at the beginning of the text. “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.’”

It is God who opens the door for this heavenly argument. God invites and welcomes the debate. God is seeking an invested conversation partner in the fate



of the world. Before this, God's interactions with humans like Adam and Noah were strictly about humanity's ability to be obedient to what they were told. Now we have what Sacks calls "a turning point in the history of the spirit." 4

But even if God sought this sort of interaction, how was Abraham brave enough to enter into it? Abraham risks his very existence to challenge God. How could he have done it? It is important to remember that when God came to Abraham and told him he would be a great nation if he left behind everything he had ever known, his country, his kin and his father's house, he did just that. He was fearless in his trust in God. And once again Abraham's fearless faith shines through. There is clearly a reason why God chose Abraham to enter into this adventurous journey of creating what will be a nation.

It is easy to solely get caught up in Abraham's actions and his fearless faithfulness. A moment ago we reveled in how audacious Abraham was but that is nothing compared to God's audaciousness and faith. After seeing all of the ways we humans fail, God dares to invite us to the table where the fate of all there is will be settled. Needless to say this is a bold and risky, perhaps even reckless move. After all, I know me and you know you, and we are pretty darn flawed in a multitude of ways. Now, we too are responsible for the justice to be found in our midst. Now, we have been granted a voice in possibly shaping God's will. Are you kidding me? If that does not blow your mind, I am telling you it should.

So what does it mean for you and for me? It means that what we do can help shape what God does. What a truly remarkable and perhaps terrifying thought. And in light of this, what an awesome responsibility is placed upon our prayer life. Sometimes we question whether God hears our prayers or not. Well, consider yourself heard, and carefully heard, no less.

Many of us were taught to pray with an attitude of obedient supplication. We come before the Creator of the Universe, heads bowed, in recognition that we are speaking to one who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. We offer our deepest gratitude because all that we are and all that we have is a gift we have



received from this Creator. We lift up respectful requests regarding both our worries and our dreams for the world, for those we love, and for ourselves. Perhaps we even throw in a few “thees” and “thous” that the formalness of our prayer may demonstrate the seriousness of our intention.

All of this is well and good and proper. All of it is deeply pious and appropriate. But it is not all of what our prayer life can be. None of us is Abraham. But we are welcome to borrow from his audacity. Prayers that are pious, reserved, and respectful are always appropriate. But they can run the risk of being limp and bloodless. We are invited to prayer that is passionate and bold as well. We too can argue with heaven. We too can debate with God about what is happening in the world, with those we love, and with ourselves. We too can question the divine.

I told you earlier that I am hopeless when it comes to negotiation, to debate, to mixing it up with others. But with God I am a very different type of person. With God I just cannot help myself, I let it all hang out. I can argue all day with God. I find myself being brutally honest about everything, including the best of my intentions and the worst of my motivations. I will wrangle with and seek to coax and cajole God endlessly. I wish I could say I do this because I share Abraham’s fearless faithfulness but it is more likely immature impertinence that drives me. Clearly there is still some growing up that I need to do.

Nonetheless, God began this conversation with us so many generations ago. We have been invited to question and query and even challenge God. Even as we recognize that we are mere creations of the one who created us we are also welcomed into a deep and abiding intimacy; welcomed to reveal ourselves, warts all; welcomed to debate and argue just as we would with the very closest of friends. Yes, we are called to be faithful servants of the divine but we are called to be more than that as well. We were created in the image of the divine. And with that remarkable gift comes a great responsibility. If our God is one of justice and compassion, so we are called to the same. If we pray mightily for God’s loving intervention in the world, we too are called to lovingly intervene in the world. If



we are bold enough to challenge how God is at work we can certainly expect that God will have challenges for us.

The late, great Fred Craddock once wrote, “Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is.”

So let us seek to be as brave and faithful as Abraham in our prayers. Let us pour all of ourselves into our conversations with the divine. Let us trust that what and how we pray can make a difference in the fate of the world and the people we are becoming. Pray as if every word upon your lips and in your hearts is being intently listened to and even possibly shaping how God is at work in the world. We have been invited to nothing less.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1 Sacks, Jonathan, *Lessons In Leadership*, Maggid Books, USA, 2015, p. xx.

2 Fretheim, Terence E., *The New Interpreter’s Bible: vol. I*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994, p. 468.

3 Sacks, p. 103.

4 Sacks, p. 103.