

Sermon for July 17, 2016 – Pentecost 9*

Genesis 18:20-32

Theme: A Lesson on Intercession.

- 1) Be concerned about your neighbor.
- 2) Base your request on the LORD's mercy.
- 3) Pray boldly and persistently.
- 4) Be open to God's answer.

²⁰ Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." ²² The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing-- to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ²⁶ The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." ²⁷ Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." ²⁹ Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." ³⁰ Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." ³¹ Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it." ³² Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

Introduction

What would you do if you had gay neighbors: would you love them or hate them? Would you act as if there was nothing wrong with their lifestyle or condemn them every chance you got?

What if your neighbors weren't gay, but just sexually immoral – bragging about their “love ‘em and leave ‘em” conquests: would you treat them any differently than if they were gay?

Abraham had both kinds of neighbors. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were about as far from Abraham's tent as Green Bay is from our Church, were filled with gay and straight people who exemplified sexual immorality.¹ So what did Abraham do about it? Did he simply accept their sinful lifestyle and do nothing? Did he wish God's judgment on them? No, rather Abraham prayed that the people of these cities be spared from God's judgment.

Let us learn from Abraham's example how we should pray for all people – even those who are openly immoral - under the theme: **A Lesson on Intercession.** 1) *Be concerned about your neighbor.* 2) *Base your request on the LORD's mercy.* 3) *Pray boldly and persistently.* 4) *Be open to God's answer.*

Part One: Be concerned about your neighbor.

Before we dive into our sermon text, let us consider a little bit of the history leading up to it. Some 25 years earlier, Abraham and his nephew Lot came into the land of Canaan together. These two men loved the LORD and confessed their faith wherever they went.ⁱⁱ The LORD blessed both their herds to such a degree that it became impossible for them to stay together. Lot chose to live near the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because the land there appeared to be good. Abraham went the other direction towards Hebron.

The Bible describes Sodom and Gomorrah as wicked cities – filled with greed, sexual immorality and violence. (Sadly, that description seems to fit many cities in our world today, doesn't it?) The lifestyle of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah distressed Lot so much that he tried to warn them of their sin; but they refused to repent.ⁱⁱⁱ

On the day our text takes place, three men came to visit old Abraham. Two of them were angels and the other was the LORD himself. The primary reason for their visit was to tell Abraham that Sarah would give birth to their promised son in the next year, which gave Abraham great joy! But the LORD also told Abraham the other reason He came: to judge Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness.

Having dealt with the King of Sodom at least once before^{iv}, Abraham knew how bad these cities were. It would have been easy for him to say: "That's right, LORD, damn those people to hell. Just make sure you get my nephew Lot and his family out of there before you do it." But Abraham doesn't do this. He is saddened that the judgment of the inhabitants of these wicked cities is at hand. Hoping against all hope, he wants them to be spared from the hell that awaited them.^v He wants them to turn to the LORD in true repentance and be saved.

And so we read: *Abraham approached [the LORD] and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing-- to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."*

Do you notice that Abraham, in the way he phrased his prayer, is not merely asking that the LORD show mercy on the righteous? Rather he is asking the LORD to spare everyone in Sodom

and Gomorrah (even the wicked) for the sake of the righteous. Why is that? Because if those cities had any believers in them, they would be busy doing what believers do: proclaiming the Gospel through their words and actions. And if the Gospel is proclaimed, then the people of Sodom might come to their senses, repent of their sins and look to the promised Savior for forgiveness. But how horrible it would be if the Lord swept away the righteous (that is, those who believed in the LORD) with the wicked in judgment. In the eyes of the world it would seem as if God did not differentiate between those who believed in him and those who did not.

“But,” someone might ask, “Doesn’t God sometimes allow the righteous to die alongside the wicked? I mean, a lot of people die in disasters. Are we to assume that they are all unbelievers?” No, we are never to assume that. Believers often die together with unbelievers in war, terrorist attacks and natural calamities. But there is a huge difference between the calamities of today and the judgment God brought upon Sodom and Gomorrah. The disasters we see around us today are the natural consequences of sin being in the world. Since God nowhere tells us that they are specific acts of punishment, the righteous can die with the wicked in the same event. When it comes to Sodom and Gomorrah, however, God clearly tells us that the destruction of those cities was His judgment on the wicked. On top of this, the destruction of those cities was not a natural disaster. Rather, like the flood, it was a supernatural disaster meant to consume only the wicked and warn all who would hear about it.

But let’s go back to Abraham. What can we learn from his prayer? First of all, we learn to care about our neighbors - even if they are unbelievers. God does not want us to take pleasure in the death of the wicked – just as he himself has no pleasure in their destruction.^{vi} Rather, God wants us to have the same concern for the lost that He himself has for them in Christ. He wants us to pray for them – just like Abraham prayed – realizing that we too are every bit as sinful in God’s sight as the people of Sodom. Maybe our sins are not homosexuality, but lust, greed, envy, and hatred fill our hearts often enough. If we are honest with ourselves, it is only by God’s grace that we have been led to repentance and believe in Jesus for salvation. God’s grace saved us when we were lost in sin, therefore we plead that God would graciously save others for Christ’s sake.

Part Two: Base your requests on God’s mercy.

Ok, now that we see the importance of praying for others, how should we go about praying for them? First of all, notice that Abraham did not minimize the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah or say that they deserved a second chance. He doesn’t even say that the righteous deserve God’s love. No, Abraham bases his request solely on the justice and mercy God promised to have for all who believe in him.

And this is important for us to remember when we intercede on behalf of others. Like Abraham we should acknowledge that we are dust: that we have no right to come to God on our own, or that God should listen to us for our own sake. Rather, we trust God will hear us for his mercy’s sake, and it’s on the basis of his mercy that we pray.

Why should God listen to our prayers? Why should God spare anyone from disaster? Jesus is the answer to those questions. He took the sins of the world upon himself so that, whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.^{vii}

This is why every intercession we offer should be done in Jesus' name, acknowledging that the only reason we can pray for anyone is because Jesus paid for that person's body and soul on the cross. For Christ's sake we ask God to hear us, and for Christ's sake He does.

Part Three: Pray boldly and persistently.

When you look at Abraham's prayer, doesn't it (humanly speaking) seem a little irritating? I mean, Abraham basically kept asking God for the same thing over and over again: that the cities be spared for the sake of the righteous – reevaluating their number as he went along. Don't you think God was getting a little annoyed at Abraham's prayer? I don't. Why? Because this is how God wants us to pray. Using the parable of the persistent widow, Jesus once told his disciples that *they should always pray and not give up.*^{viii}

The Lord loves it when we come to Him again and again with our intercessions until he answers them. Such persistence shows that we are concerned. When we remind the LORD again and again of who He is and the promises He made, we show that we have not forgotten His Gospel. We believe what He said – and this faith God credits to us as righteousness.^{ix} Let us, then, pray boldly – trusting in the LORD's promise to hear us for Christ's sake. Let us, also, pray persistently – showing how the salvation of other's lies heavy on our hearts.

Part Four: Be open to God's answer

Abraham asked God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah from judgement if only 10 righteous people could be found in them. The LORD, in His mercy, agreed to that. But what is the rest of the story? The Bible tells us that Abraham woke up to see smoke rising from the region where Sodom and Gomorrah once stood.

Didn't God answer Abraham's prayer? Yes, He did. God would have spared these two major cities if only 10 believers could be found in them. Sadly, after two decades of living and witnessing in Sodom, Lot and his two daughters were the only believers in that entire region. He spared them from judgement by having them flee to the nearby mountain town of Zoar. For Lot's sake, the LORD even spared that small village from destruction. But as for Sodom and Gomorrah, their time of grace had come to an end.

Do you think Abraham was disappointed with God when He woke up and saw the smoke? Do you think he shook his head and said: "Why all this destruction? I thought you were a merciful and loving God who accepts people as they are?" No, I am convinced that Abraham did not question God's judgment. Abraham knew the LORD takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. He wants everyone to repent and be saved.^x But Abraham also knew the wickedness of those cities – ever refusing to repent. Unbelief and impenitence will always result in condemnation.

God was absolutely just in judging Sodom and Gomorrah because there was nothing left for those cities except to serve as a warning to all who refuse to repent of sin.

What can we learn from this? Sadly, not everyone we pray for will be saved. No matter what we do, a hardened unbeliever will continue in his unbelief and refuse God's mercy. In the end, he will face God's judgment, and there is nothing we can do to change that fact. And, when it happens, we should realize that his condemnation is not the result of God not wanting him to be saved. Jesus died for his sins – of course God wanted him to be saved! The unbeliever's damnation is a result of his own continued rejection of the Gospel. If we witnessed the Gospel to him in love, there is nothing more we could have done to prevent his fate. God's judgment on him is just.

The LORD listens to the prayers of all who believe in Him. He wants us to continue interceding for our unbelieving neighbors. And how should we intercede for them? First of all, out of genuine concern for their souls, we pray that the LORD spare them. We base our request not on any "good" they have done, but completely on God's mercy. We continue to pray for them in in all boldness and persistence, trusting in the promises and hope God's Gospel gives us. Finally, whatever happens, we thank God for His mercy – even if it's rejected. As the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah teaches, everything the LORD does is just and right. Everything He does, He does out of love for those who believe in him. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Jude 1:7

ⁱⁱ The Hebrew phrase "called on the name of the LORD" used in Genesis 12:8 and 13:4 seems to mean that Abraham (and Lot who was with him) called others to know the LORD.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. 2 Peter 2:7; Genesis 19:7,9

^{iv} Cf. Genesis 14:21-23

^v Some people claim that Abraham is just praying for Sodom and Gomorrah because Lot lived there. I am sure that Lot was on Abraham's mind, but I do not think that this was the only reason he interceded for those cities. If this was all Abraham cared about, he could have simply prayed: "Please spare Lot's family from your judgement."

^{vi} Cf. Ezekiel 33:11

^{vii} Cf. John 3:16

^{viii} Luke 18:1 NIV84

^{ix} Cf. Genesis 15:6

^x Cf. Ezekiel 18:32