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“Let’s Make a Deal”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

July 28, 2013

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

I arrived home last weekend from a fascinating experience with DukeEngage in Durham, England, an extension of their immersive service work with non-profits in Durham, North Carolina. Within that period of two-and-a-half weeks, I had a chance to visit Newcastle as well as Edinburgh. I was discussing with *Peter Fish* before worship that I made a pilgrimage to the Cathedral Church of American Presbyterianism: St. Giles’ Cathedral. At some other time, *Marilyn*, I am willing to do a Faith and Community Class on this experience both in terms of religion as well as the interesting correlations between Durham, UK, and Durham, NC, sister cities. It was a rewarding experience for me and the students; I’m eager to tell my story to anyone who would hear. It’s good to be home.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, open our ears and fill our hearts with Your Holy Spirit to hear Your Word because You have blessed us with abundance, with many blessings in and through Your Son, Jesus Christ, who has become one with us in all things except sin. Amen.

Many years ago, when I was first ordained, I was assigned to a church in Aiken, SC. On arrival to that particular congregation, a movement of spirituality called the charismatic renewal was alive and well. I have no idea whether you have any inkling of that Pentecostal movement of the Holy Spirit in mainline churches back in the early 1970s, but it was a very challenging moment for me because United Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, and Episcopalians, primarily, were all touched by this spiritual renewal movement.

The biggest challenge I faced was their effort to co-opt me into the movement. Not because I didn't appreciate their emphasis on community, their renewed appreciation for reading the Word of God, but it was their understanding of the nature of prayer that caused me the most discomfort. They wanted me, in my preaching and in my teaching, to be expectant—when I prayed for anything large or small, I should be expectant that the Spirit of God will intervene and act. My discomfort in my discussions with them revolved around the simple truth that I thought it was almost manipulative, magical to turn to God and say, “I have a headache, it hurts, I need to get to work. Please heal me.” They were really into being “slain” in the spirit and the healing of sicknesses of all kinds. It gave me some insight into their understanding of the imperative of Jesus to seek and to knock and you shall find. They took this very Scripture we heard from Luke and said, “Listen: if you're going to knock and to seek and ask, expect a response.”

On the other side, I was fearful that if I were uncomfortable with that understanding of the nature of prayer, I would fall into the trap of writing off intercessory prayer altogether. Why pray for material things, healing and any particular personal need that is ours when the world is what it is? The consequences of our actions are what they are. God is involved but He won't change the cosmic laws just because I asked Him to do so.

Between those two particular poles of understanding the nature of prayer, our two Scriptures today are a good match for helping us appreciate what Jesus is trying to teach His disciples and as well as how Abraham pleaded through the art of negotiation with God. Both readings demand a level of relationship that prayer is to form in our lives, whether it's public or personal.

I had a brief huddle with *Harold Dunlap* before church this morning, and he had a twinkle in his eye because he was going to enjoy reading the story of Abraham and God as much as we would enjoy hearing it. That story is priceless—the art of making the deal, the art of negotiation that I’m sure is taught in a series of classes at UNC’s Kenan-Flagler Business School and/or The Fuqua School of Business at Duke. In this particular encounter, the Lord God hears a great outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah. How grave was their sin? It was the face of evil in their time. He says, “I have to go down and see for myself. I am not going to prejudge the situation. I am going to go see for myself what is going on, and I’ll know for myself.”

On his way there, he meets with Abraham, and Abraham knows that if he, in fact, goes to see for himself, he will condemn the city for their grave sin. Immediately, Abraham begins the haggle by saying to God, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” It’s a theme that Jesus Himself picks up in His parables later on in the New Testament. Abraham goes on to say, “Let’s make a deal. If I can find fifty righteous people, will that be enough to calm down your desire to destroy them because they deserve punishment?” He says in a very powerful way, “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?” (Genesis 18:25) And the Lord said, “If you find fifty, I will forgive the whole place.” And then Abraham says, “What about forty-five? Then thirty?” He argued him down to twenty and then finally, he kept trying to phrase his next request for an argument down with, “Don’t be angry if I just speak once more. How about ten?” And finally, God says, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy the city.” This kind of haggling is not something we would do at the Farmer’s Market, right? We wouldn’t go to the Farmer’s Market and say I want these eggs or this fruit or this cheese, and let’s work on a price. You pay the market and you move on.

I was with the Men of Faith at breakfast this past Friday, and *Andy Henry* reminded me of the haggling scene in the movie *The Life of Brian*. It’s a classic film on fanaticism by Monty Python. He sent me the link. It’s clever because Brian is running away from the Romans, who think he is Jesus. He is trying to buy a

disguise from the vendor. The vendor wouldn't let him go for the price of the item until he haggled. "What? You won't haggle with me?" It takes about five minutes for him to try to work through this haggling exercise to finally slip away and avoid the Romans.

I've had some experiences in Italy and Northern Africa with the Rue de la Kasbah and the marketplace, but my favorite story of haggling is from *Joe and Carlisle Harvard*. They were in Istanbul, Turkey, where they bought an Oriental carpet. It took them two or three days to buy the carpet because they had one dinner plus Turkish coffee time with the vendor who was making this arrangement with them. I am sure he was convincing them that they were getting the deal of the century. Whether they did or not, I have no clue, nor do they. But the story they tell is priceless. Clearly, a great example of haggling, which I think is at the heart of what Genesis is trying to communicate, is namely, *it's all about the relationship*. In Eastern cultures, it's all a matter of respect and trust to engage in the art of the negotiation, in bargaining in such a way that a relationship is formed of intimacy between the buyer and those who want to sell. It might be foreign to us, but I think you get the idea as Abraham haggles with God about the number of those righteous ones in Sodom and Gomorrah that would be the basis for God saying, "I yield to mercy over justice."

There is a parallel to the story that Jesus tells in answer to His disciples. Jesus is asked by His disciples to teach them to pray. Luke's Gospel is a Gospel of prayer. Any time Jesus had a significant decision to make, he always made himself available to His God in prayer. They saw that. They were impressed by that, and they wanted some sense of what that meant for them in their lives. So Jesus said to them, "When you pray, I want you to pray to God as Father, as Abba." It's a familial term, so often translated amongst us as "Daddy" or "Dada." (Whenever my daughter says "Dada" to me, I know she wants something, but it warms the heart.) It's a term of familial intimacy that God is trying to communicate through His Son one with us as the attitude for the way in which we conduct our prayer life. It's familial. It's intimate. It's clear that Jesus wants us to know God as He knows God as one who is as close to Him, as intimate to Him as a parent is to their child.

That is clearly the message that Jesus is trying to teach in the midst of the extremes between manipulation of prayer being a response to our request and not praying any intercessory prayers at all for fear that God is up there, way up there, distant, remote, carefree, and vindictive. Jesus is trying to say we are involved in a relationship. Prayer is precisely an expression of an intimate relationship with God, a relationship that has been captured in both stories in the Old and New Testament. Both texts that we have heard today are trying to recapture this relationship with God in intimacy.

My suggestion to you as your takeaway, as your “so what” is simply this: examine the way you pray, how you pray, to whom you pray, when you pray, and see whether it correlates to the theme and attitude of prayer captured in both of these Scriptures today. These Scriptures are calling you to a sense of prayer that involves a deep relationship of intimacy.

No matter what form it takes publicly or privately, you are called to engage with your God in Christ Jesus one with us in a relationship that leads to bringing to that God all that is in your mind and heart, just as you heard in the Lord’s Prayer. There is only one petition in that prayer—that the kingdom come. Abraham was looking to save the city of Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus is saying that if you let the kingdom come, the world will be saved. And yet, there is room in the midst of that prayer to ask about our daily bread, to seek forgiveness, and to ask finally that we not be brought to the time of trial. So be open in your prayer and accept the invitation that these Scriptures offer us today: Pray like this, Abba, Father. God desires us to have a deep intimate relationship, in public worship, and in our personal lives throughout all our life.

Influences: Andy Henry
Robert Duggan
Monika Hellwig
Joe and Carlisle Harvard