

“Give and Take”

Genesis 18:20-33; Luke 11:5-13

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 12, 2015 – 7th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

What a strange situation we find in our Old Testament reading for today. Here we have God and Abraham on the slopes of Hebron determining the fate of a city. The place is Sodom and, as we recall, it was a city famous for its sinful behavior. The people there weren't just bad; apparently they were really bad. The city's reputation was known far and wide.

So here are God and Abraham going back and forth over what will be the outcome of the city. It's obvious from the context of their conversation that what God has seen is very troubling and destruction is on its way. The decision has been made. Yet Abraham has the audacity to object and to argue the outcome.

Abraham is not denying that this is indeed a sinful and wicked city. He concedes that. What he **is** concerned about is that the innocent will be destroyed along with the evil. This doesn't seem fair, and what tells him that is the sense of right and wrong that God has implanted within his soul. It is a matter of justice. Abraham takes it upon himself to confront the Lord with this inequity and to ask God not to act rashly. That's some nerve on the part of a mere human.

What happens next is a cosmic bargaining session. Abraham challenges God: "Are you really going to destroy the innocent along with the guilty? Suppose there are fifty righteous people within the city; if there are, will you then just sweep it away? Won't you spare it because of the fifty upright people who live there? You'll excuse me for saying so, but isn't the Judge of the whole world supposed to act justly? No offense intended, Lord."

Perhaps this is one of those times when it would be better to think something rather than to express it out loud. But too late now, the words are already out of his mouth. Well, I can imagine the Lord taking a long pause here, which makes Abraham feel just a little uncomfortable and heightens the sense of drama.

"Well, OK Abraham, if I find fifty innocent people in Sodom I will spare the whole city for their sake. You've made your point. I hope that will satisfy you."

Maybe Abraham doesn't know when to quit while he's ahead and so he goes on: "Excuse my boldness in continuing to speak to you, Lord. I'm only a mortal and have no right to say anything. (Of course, then he goes right ahead and says it!) But perhaps there will only be forty-five righteous people instead of fifty. If that's the case, will you destroy the whole city because there are five fewer?"

The Lord, with perhaps another long pause, replies to Abraham: "I have considered it and I will not destroy the city if I find forty-five innocent people."

Abraham is emboldened by the Lord's response and so responds with another challenge: "Perhaps there will be only forty?"

"So be it," says God. "I will not destroy the city if there are forty."

Abraham just doesn't know when to stop. "Please don't be angry with me, but I must speak again. What, Lord, if there are only thirty? Will you destroy the whole city?"

"I will not do it if I can find thirty who are truly righteous."

"Forgive my boldness, Lord, but how about if there are only twenty? That's not a lot, but still significant. What will you do then?"

"Twenty? Did you say twenty? Well, alright, I will not destroy the city if I find twenty."

"Now have patience, Lord. I'm only going to speak one more time. How about if there's only ten, ten innocent persons?"

"Ten. I will not destroy it if there are ten."

"Well then, Lord, how about if ... " But Abraham stops short here, perhaps because he doesn't like the look the Lord is giving him. "I guess that's all I wanted to say." And after their conversation was completed," the scriptures say, "the Lord went away and Abraham returned home.

What we have here in these verses is one of the oldest examples of concession and compromise. Interestingly, most of the conceding is on God's part, but Abraham also backs off when it's apparent that there is no use pursuing it further.

He keeps bargaining it down and down until finally he realizes that God will not go any further. Abraham has reached the Almighty's bottom line, so wisely, he stops. He has made his point and God has bent to his argument. Maybe Sodom shouldn't be saved if ten upright people can't be found among all its citizens? The bargaining has ended and both Abraham and God have gone as far as they can.

With Independence Day still fresh on our minds we're reminded about the difficult work of making this people into a nation. The Revolutionary War may have been over, but in some ways the hardest part was just beginning. The framers of the Constitution came together with quite different views as to what this new country should be about. They were rebellious individuals who had dared to challenge the authority of the King. Such strong-willed men weren't likely to be passive negotiators.

A fortunate thing happened, though. While this group of patriots could not agree naturally on many things, they did manage to compromise. If they hadn't been able to do this, our history would be differently written. Instead of one "united" states, we might have been a crazy-quilt of tiny nations each vying for supremacy. Could you imagine the nation of Rhode Island taking its place within the communities of the world? Or Delaware? Or Maine?

Except for the spirit of reasonable and patriotic concession, men like Hamilton and Jay and Madison could never have come together in agreement. If they were not willing to concede and compromise they never would have been able to affix their names to a final document.

What they adopted may not have been totally ideal to any one of them, the alternative was to press their views to the point that resolution would have been impossible. They knew where to push their points and where to concede them so that they could draft a constitution that everyone might live with. Democracy was the result and it has lived and flourished now for over 200 years.

This is still a struggle we face today whenever those entrusted with legislative office come together to work out the practical issues of moving our country forward. The trick is to understand the fine line between responsible and irresponsible concession. Regularly our lawmakers show us their best in coming down on the right side of this difficult balance. Sometimes, though, pride and obstinacy and power cloud the picture. Unbending ideology can stop lawmaking in its tracks as we've seen in our current Congress. Some actions build this country up, but others tear it down.

The challenge is not just in the legislative arena. We all have to pit principle and compromise against each other as we try to make responsible decisions in our daily lives. We must determine where to stick with a certain course and where to concede it. What drives the question is our broader understanding of life and what we believe. Knowledge, coupled with faith and conscience, give us the basis for our decision-making; yet ever-changing circumstances require constant consideration.

When God gave in to Abraham's pleadings it is not because of our ancestor's eloquence. He wasn't some early Perry Mason. What the Biblical story illustrates is a quality that is of the very nature of God—and that quality is mercy. It shows that even God can make concessions, though not of weakness but of strength. Our Lord is a God of compassion and is willing to forgive, even when the actions of people do not warrant such generosity.

Though we are unworthy in many ways of the love God shows to us, it is mercy that raises us up to this higher level. If God waited for us to be fully good before considering our needs, the wait would be forever. By God's example we are shown the way that we are deal with others—not as inferiors but as equals.

Only when we show forbearance for the sins of our sisters and brothers can we fully receive them. Only when they can return that same forgiveness to us, can the circle be completed. For the good of all we need to learn to live with all, and sometimes that means to bend our desires for a greater good. Compassion and concession is the only way we can move forward in life. It is in God's character and it's also in God's plan for **our** life together.