

Towson Presbyterian Church

August 11, 2019

Rev. Joel Strom

Genesis 18:20-32 and Luke 11:1-13

“Who’s Being Changed When We Pray?”

Both of our readings this morning are about prayer, and let’s start with the first one, from Genesis. God has decided to destroy the city of Sodom, due to the apparent wickedness of its people. And Abraham begins a conversation with God, asking God that if he finds 50 people in the city that are living good and whole lives will God spare the city? God says yes, and Abraham and God begin this battering – well what if I find forty-five? Will you still spare it? Yes. Thirty? Twenty? Ten? Finally, God says, “If you find ten I will not destroy it.”

So I guess there’s “good news” in this story? I guess. Ultimately, God chooses to show mercy, but for God to show mercy Abraham needs to plead with God. God needs to be convinced to be compassionate and merciful. And in the end, when God decided to spare the city because of 10 righteous people, you still walk away from this story kind of afraid of this God. Linger in the back of your head is the question “Can I trust this God?”

At the time when the book of Genesis was written, this story may in fact have been a leap forward in terms of our understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God. This God can be pleaded with and God listens and considers the desires of Abraham. When Genesis was written, the Israelites had numerous neighboring countries and each had their own God, and at the time this story very well might have been a step in the right direction in terms of what it means to be in relationship with God. Maybe...

But what we do find in this story is that it describes Abraham as having a relationship with God. His connection with God is not one-sided, where God speaks and Abraham bows his head and simply listens. He can talk back to God, he can challenge God, he can be honest and authentic with God. And that is what a real relationship with God looks like.

When we put these two stories side-by-side, Genesis 18 and Luke 11, 2000-3,000 years have transpired between the two, and what we have is an evolved understanding of God and what it looks like to pray. And in Luke, it all starts with the first word in what we now call “The Lord’s Prayer.” Jesus begins by addressing God as *Father*. He says that when you pray you don’t enter that space seeing God as a distant deity without a name or a judge who simply decides who’s good and who’s bad. Jesus begins with this very intimate word – *Father*. And he doesn’t necessarily mean “male.” Instead, he describes someone we can trust; someone we can be loved by.

Here at TPC, and within our denomination, we strive to be inclusive when it comes to how we address God. For many, referring to God as “Father” isn’t helpful, and I can understand that. The Bible often refers to God using male pronouns and we try to use the word “God” instead of “he” or “him.” Because God isn’t male or female but has both masculine and feminine attributes. And if we’re honest, the way Jesus describes God, and even Jesus himself, seem to embody more feminine attributes than masculine, or at least how we describe feminine and masculine attributes in our culture today.

But let’s not miss this – when Jesus addresses God as “Father” in his prayer, this is a giant leap forward. Jesus is saying, when we pray and enter into that space, we can trust this God and be loved by this God.

I imagine we all, in some way, struggle with prayer. What is it, right? I suspect we all ask these questions - how do we do it and when is a good time for it? What do we say or not say? Is there a set time we should pray, or can we pray in the car or taking a walk? Should we use specific prayers that others have written, or should it only come from the depths of our own heart? And finally, I bet we all struggle with this - am I doing it right? Is this what it’s supposed to look like?

These are questions that I assume we are all asking, and Jesus, when asked by his disciples to teach them how to pray, doesn’t seem interested in answering those kinds of questions. He’s not very interested in explaining the process of prayer. Instead, he seems more interested in inviting us into a relationship with God.

Is that a word that you use to describe you and God? A relationship? If not, I invite you to consider it. We probably don’t use it enough, actually. Each of us has a relationship with God.

Think about some of the relationships you have in your life right now – the good ones. Two people make up that relationship – it’s not one-sided. You give to it, but you also receive from it. And in an honest and authentic relationship you can share how you truly feel, whatever that feeling is. You can share your joys, but you can also share your doubts and fears and questions. And relationships have seasons to them, too. There are times when you feel close and connected and everything is just right, and there are seasons where you do not. You feel the distance and the connection is not as strong as it once was. Finally, sometimes the relationship changes because someone within it changes. It doesn’t mean that it ends, but it becomes something new.

When Jesus describes prayer, he describes it first as a relationship. We are invited into a relationship where we can come before God in prayer and truly be ourselves – our most honest, authentic and real selves. And in this space, there is no judgment. We don’t have to impress anyone; we don’t have to be anyone else.

Have you ever experienced that? Can you have that kind of relationship with God? Because that’s what Jesus invites us into, and ultimately that’s the kind of prayer that doesn’t change God. Instead, it changes us.

We often come to God kind of like Abraham – if we plead enough with God we can change God’s mind. And it’s common to come with the understanding that prayer is “asking for things” and saying to God “I want this” or “I want that.” And if I just pray more, or harder, or say the right words, I can convince God or change God’s mind. And we can develop this almost “mechanical” understanding of God – as long as I do “A” “B” should happen. As long as I pull this lever, this will happen over here. God becomes this machine in the sky and if we just use it in the right way, it will work. But the kind of prayer that Jesus invites us into begins with an understanding of prayer as a relationship, where we bring our full selves – our most honest and authentic selves to God.

In today’s reading Jesus tells this kind of strange story, saying, let’s say you go to your neighbor at midnight asking for bread so you can feed your guest, and your neighbor says no. Ultimately, your friend will give in if you keep asking, if you keep knocking, if you keep going back and back and back.

The invitation for us is if we can be persistent in our searching for God – if we can keep asking questions, keep wondering, keep wanting more – we will receive and we will find and the door will be opened, *because we will have opened the door for God to enter in to our lives*. And that is the kind of prayer that ultimately changes us. That is the kind of prayer that ultimately transforms us.

Jesus ends our reading by contrasting the love parents have for their children and the love God the Father has for each of us, saying ultimately it doesn’t compare. If we can see God as a good and loving parent that we can trust, maybe we can see it also like this: God as loving parent seems to be more interested in *not* giving us what we want but instead giving us what we need the most in this life.

Thanks be to God.