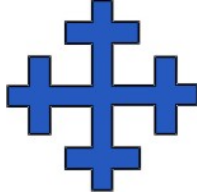


St. Mary of the Harbor

Provincetown, Massachusetts



Pentecost 7 C Proper 12 2019

The Very Reverend Terry R. Pannell

Genesis 18:17-32

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." Then the Lord said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."

So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty 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?" And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."



Prayer of Last Resort

Does God listen to our prayers? That is a perfectly reasonable question is it not? Most of us at some point in life have wondered if the Almighty hears our prayers. I would like to believe that God does. I would like to believe that giving voice to our hopes and prayers makes a difference, even if it is in some small way.

When I think of people praying, I am reminded of the opening scene in the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life*. It is winter in Bedford Falls and the streets are empty. Inside their homes, the townspeople are praying for their neighbor who is in trouble. The camera pans up to a starlit sky above and you overhear a conversation in heaven about a fellow named George Bailey. Clarence, a slow witted angel with the faith of a child, is summoned and told that he is being sent to earth to help George. Clarence asks, "is he is sick?" "No, worse," the other angel answers. "He's discouraged." ¹

I don't know much about angels. I don't know if they even exist but I do know what it is like to be discouraged. And I bet you do too. It is hard not to be discouraged, especially these days when it appears that evil seems to be gaining the upper hand in the world. It wouldn't be the first time.

¹ <http://www.lc.ncu.edu.tw/learneng/script/ItsAWonderfulLife.pdf>

Over 4000 years ago, Abraham stood before God looking out at Sodom and Gomorrah, two notorious wealthy cities known for their indulgent lifestyles, their cruelty to outsiders and violence toward visitors, and their indifference toward the poor.² Abraham learns that God has heard a great outcry coming from Sodom and Gomorrah and has sent emissaries to investigate. If what God is hearing is true, it does not bode well for Sodom and Gomorrah.

Knowing that God is just, Abraham inquires whether or not the same fate will befall the innocent and the wicked alike. In the back and forth of an intriguing conversation, Abraham presses God for an answer and each time God relents. God even offers to forgive everyone living in Sodom and Gomorrah, saving them from certain destruction for the sake of a few righteous individuals, which evidently were few and far between.

We all know what happened next. The question is, was God responsible for wiping Sodom and Gomorrah from the face of the earth? Some people will tell you that is exactly what God did.

There are a number of problems with that view of the Genesis narrative, not the least of which is that it does not correspond with the merciful, compassionate, forgiving and loving God that Jesus described in the prayer he taught his disciples. That does not mean that unchecked evil has no consequences. The consequences of evil are real and they are grave because evil can easily destroy a community, not from the outside though but from within.

Long before God heard an outcry coming from Sodom and Gomorrah, the destruction of those two communities was already well under way. The people there just didn't know it. Their arrogance had blinded them to their complicity in their own deaths.

It happens whenever people act with impunity and justify putting their own priorities over God's priorities. And what are God's priorities? The prophet Micah summed them up for the ages: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God. And as Jesus would add later, love your neighbor just as you would God, with all you've got.

If you buy into the notion that God unleashed divine wrath upon Sodom and Gomorrah, I am not so sure that bodes well for the future of our own nation. What does it say about Americans who have no qualms about looking the other way while corrupt politicians and duplicitous, hollow-hearted charlatans masquerading as God's ministers behave reprehensibly?

What does it say about Americans who blindly support policies that deprive poor children of food so billionaires can get a tax cut? Is that justice? No, it is not. And what about those who revile foreigners and turn their back to refugees fleeing violence in

² Ezekiel 16:48-50

their own countries? Is that mercy? No, its is not. And what about those who remain silent in the face of injustice and suffering? Is that humility? No, it is complacency.

Sodom and Gomorrah's obliteration was sealed the day they forfeited their souls for wealth and power. Their destruction was assured the day they abandoned their responsibility to insure justice for the least, the last and the left behind. Their fate was secured the moment they ignored the call to be merciful by refusing to acknowledge the outcry coming from their neighbors in need. Sodom and Gomorrah's destiny was guaranteed the moment the people there refused to open their hearts to love when they had the opportunity.

The fact is, long before the destruction of the human community, comes the destruction of the human soul. It does not happen suddenly but over time. It begins with an inflated sense of self followed by an erosion of trust in God and in their neighbor. And a community or a nation that has forfeited its soul is already as good as dead.

So then what do you do when you look upon a nation that seems intent on embracing its own destruction? How easy it would be just to through up one's hands and say *to hell with it!* How many of us has been tempted to do that? How many of us have?

That is not what Abraham did. Genesis says that Abraham was a righteous man, a friend of God who advocated mercy even for those who failed to show it to others. If that seems counterintuitive, it's because it is. So is loving those who know not love. But when you are facing the extinction of human souls, mercy is the prayer of last resort.

So keep praying. And use your God given voice to speak up for those whose voices are not being heard, if not for the nation, then for you own soul. For as every prophet since Abraham has known, our own lives begin to end on the day we remain silent about things that matter to God. ³

³ paraphrased from MLK's sermon on March 8, 1965 in Selma, Alabama. From that sermon: "A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true."

