Sermon for Proper 12

RCL Lectionary, Year C

Genesis 18:20-32 / Psalm 138 / Colossians 2:6-19 / Luke 11:1-13

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

July 25th, 2010
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

In God's Counsel

We hear two great conversations of our tradition this day. The first is an ancient one between Abraham and Yahweh, the great spiritual ancestor of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the God of Covenant who has recently promised to bring recompense for the horrific sins of two cities. The second is a conversation between Jesus and his disciples, where they ask him quite simply to teach them how to pray. What both conversations reveal to us is a profound teaching about leading a life of faith with our God -- a life that is as shocking to us in some ways as it is liberating in others.

Contrary to a common misconception, the great sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not about homosexuality. According to the prophets, and as they are recalled later in scripture even by Jesus himself, the cardinal sin of these two cities was their lack of hospitality, and as part of that, their craven violence towards strangers. This stands in sharp contrast to last week's reading where Abraham welcomes and generously hosts three strangers by the Oaks of Mamre, and in doing so he welcomes God. It also picks up on a thread that runs throughout our scriptures and even through the wider history of the human family -- and that thread is a longstanding tension between urban and agrarian communities. Abraham, epitomizing the pastoral and nomadic roots of the ancient Israelites, represented a culture where hospitality and harmony with the land was a necessity and a key part of his identity. It was this identity of hospitality and identification with the "strangers in the land" that would become a key part of the Israelite's identity in their walk with God -- so key, in fact, that the prophets would repeatedly call them to it whenever they fell into the easier xenophobias of the human condition. Cities, on the other hand, have forever been inclined to exploit the surrounding country for their resources and have often, as a result, polluted and alienated the well-being of the agrarian peoples and subsistence farmers who live there. This a conflict between agrarian and urban life continues well into the first century when Jesus is often preaching and teaching a countryside people who are marginalized and exploited by the urban Temple elites and the Roman occupiers of Jerusalem. For this reason, city dwellers have always been viewed with some suspicion by their rural counterparts. Think of the herdsman Abraham reflecting on the unspeakable inhospitality and rank amorality of the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. Think of the frequent extreme rhetoric in our day that highlights the American heartland's often dim view of the urbanized coasts.

But another piece of the context to Abraham's extended dialogue today with God is the ancient notion that one bad apple spoils the whole barrel. For the Israelites who hallowed this text and numerous other ancient peoples living in a capricious and frightening universe, it was often thought that having a bad person in the midst of community meant that everyone was in danger of divine retribution. A single sinner could spoil everything, could change the good fortunes of all to bad. Abraham's questions today turn this whole idea on its head and takes up this notion in an entirely different way:

If God is indeed a God of justice. . . If Yahweh, the God of gods and bearer of the covenant that is established to re-make the human family is truly righteous. . . surely He will not condemn the righteous with the unrighteous. Perhaps having one good apple in the barrel means the whole lot may be saved. Perhaps, as Jesus might say, one bit of good yeast leavens the entire batch. If there is but one righteous person in Sodom and Gomorrah, will not the God of the Universe stay divine retribution?

That Abraham puts this question before God is either very brave or very foolish. But even more compelling is that God answers, taking Abraham up in his argument, demonstrating something very profound about the life of faith and what it means for us as heirs of Abraham through the promise of our Savior Jesus Christ. For God has taken Abraham into divine counsel, and this radically alters the landscape of human-divine interaction forever.

Abraham lived in a world where the best way to relate to the gods was through appeasement. . . by offering sacrifice. It was a universe, if you will, of capricious and angry deities who constantly demanded animal and sometimes even living human offerings. But through the covenant, Abraham is drawn into an entirely different relationship with his God, with our God, who is not merely sitting loftily on high placing demands on the human family to obey every divine whim. Instead, our God is one who deigns to engage with us in the here and now, a God who speaks with us, debates with us even, converses and communes with the People of God. This is the God who will wrestle with Jacob in the wilderness, who will accede to the Israelites' demand for a king, who will stand by David when he messes up royally in every sense of the word. This is the God who will respond to Job in the whirlwind and send the prophets to renew us. This is the God who will even come among us as one of us and who will offer up divine blood in love to confront and redeem our own worst natures.

Abraham's questions about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah are not merely academic or theological, they are questions of faith -- faith not built on blind trust, but a kind of testing, probing relationality that seeks truth, that asks why, that wants to know. And God does not brush aside this kind of doubting, wondering faith. Instead, God embraces it, speaks and explains to it, engages with it. This is not a God cloaked in mystery or in the clouds of capricious, divine loftiness. This is our God who reveals the intricacies of divine judgment, who is prepared to hang out with us, who bears with us in our confusion and uncertainty, who shows up at our table and accepts our imperfect hospitality and deems it righteous enough for grace to begin unfolding.

So with this foundation in mind, we have today's Gospel, where Christ Jesus emphasizes again to us that we are in God's counsel now. We are in a position to make demands and, yes, expect something. The life of prayer is not merely pretense to make us feel better or the giving up of words to an effectively deaf god who lives so far beyond our comprehension that we mean nothing. The life of prayer is like the relationship of a good parent to a child. . . even a lover to a beloved.

Abraham dares to hold God to a standard of justice. God listens. Jesus dares us to make requests of this same God and expect a response. When we say "thy will be done on earth," like Abraham, we are demanding that God get with the program and be the God we are promised: a God of righteousness and justice, of truth, of salvation -- a God who keeps covenant and shepherds divine promises. And when we ask for our daily bread, it is not offered with a polite please, but a profoundly challenging, "Give me." For we trust that God does not give God’s precious children, but good things, and we have permission to ask for those good things -- even demand them.

As imperfect as we are, we have been drawn into God's counsel. We are promised a God who listens. And we are promised a God who will respond to our demands. This is meant to change our faith life forever, for we are no longer strangers in God's world, nor outsiders. . . now we are insiders of God’s reign, in the know, and part of the drama of salvation unfolding for all the world.