

# Sermon for Sunday, July 28, 2019 - "Teach Us to Pray"

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 28, 2019

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

Pastor Mike Blair

Scriptures: Genesis 18:16-33; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13

## Genesis 18:16-33:

<sup>16</sup>Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. <sup>17</sup>The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, <sup>18</sup>seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? <sup>19</sup>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." <sup>20</sup>Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! <sup>21</sup>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."

<sup>22</sup>So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. <sup>23</sup>Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" <sup>24</sup>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? <sup>25</sup>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?" <sup>26</sup>And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." <sup>27</sup>Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the LORD, I who am but dust and ashes. <sup>28</sup>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." <sup>29</sup>Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." <sup>30</sup>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." <sup>31</sup>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." <sup>32</sup>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." <sup>33</sup>And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Who taught you to pray? How did you learn about prayer? Did you learn to pray through the rhythms of liturgy and the poetry of hymns? Maybe a parent, grandparent or mentor taught you about prayer?

Clara and Thelma were my teachers. My father's mother, Grandma Clara, was very organized and orderly. Grandchildren would get a card in the mail that arrived on their birthday or the day before if your birthday fell on a Sunday. On the Sunday following your birthday, you would get a birthday cake decorated in a personal theme that was of interest. If the cake needed ballerinas, football, race cars or ponies, Clara was on it. She taught us prayers for grace and bedtime.

God is great, God is good ...

As a teacher, Clara knew that rhymes and repetition would help us remember.

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake ...

That prayer troubled me. Instead of going to sleep, that prayer made me feel woke!

Grandma Thelma, my maternal grandmother, had 7 kids who all had their own kids. Her house was always full of cousins and grandkids and neighborhood kids and kids who were just hanging out with all the other kids. It was always fun to visit because you never knew what would happen. Sometimes she'd stand in the kitchen and say, "Lord, have mercy, I can't keep track of this tribe! Hells bells, let's bake a cake; it's bound to be somebody's birthday!"

Both grandmothers sang a familiar refrain, "All night, all day, angels watching over me my Lord. All night, all day." Sing with me ... That song still helps me sleep well when I need to quiet my heart or slow my racing mind.

My grandmothers both knew deep suffering through tragic losses in their immediate and extended families. Clara knew the loss of sons at the ages of 7 and 26. Thelma's brother Ray died serving as a Navy pilot in WWII. Both of their family systems were wounded by alcohol abuse and a host of mental health struggles.

They both came from beloved, broken, blessed, complicated families. As I grow older, I am more aware of how deeply they both shaped my faith. They are my people and I thank God for the faith, hope and love I encountered in them and learned from them.

Thelma and Clara's prayer life held a spectrum that mirrored Abraham and Sarah's prayers. They knew prayers of longing, joy and wonder. They knew urgent prayers of intercession and grounding prayers of gratitude. All that range of prayer is held in our liturgy when we plea for God's mercy in the *Kyrie* and when we join creation's praise with *This is the Feast* and *Glory to God*.

In today's Genesis text, we have the story of Abraham in an urgent prayer of intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah. Today's text follows right on the heels of Sarah and Abraham's hospitality with the three strangers who visit them at the oaks of Mamre to bring news that Abraham and Sarah will become parents of a son. Sarah's laughter at this news foreshadows the child's name. Isaac means laughter in Hebrew.

Right after Sarah's laughter, the story pivots to Abraham walking away with the three strangers. God has a conversation with God's self about letting Abraham know about the outcry and expected judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah. God decides to let Abraham know because of Abraham's calling to bless the world by practicing righteousness and justice.

Before we get into the story of Abraham's prayer, how Abraham practices righteousness and justice with God, an important note about this story.

The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is not about homosexuality. They suffer judgement for gross injustice, violence and disregard for the poor and needy. Here's what the prophet Ezekiel says of Sodom: *This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.* Ezekiel 16:49

Genesis 19 tells of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah after the angels of God visit and are threatened by a mob who threatened to rape the guests. Lot pleads with them and even offers his daughter - a troubling and vexing response that speaks to Sodom's ravenous appetite for sexual violence and exploitation that degrades everyone. Rather than using their prosperity to help others thrive, Sodom only saw opportunities for exploitation, self-indulgence, violence and abuse of power, especially in relationship with those who were weak and vulnerable. The injustice and cruelty of Sodom poisoned everything from hospitality and travel and even the gift of human sexuality.

The prophet Jeremiah called Jerusalem to account telling them their sins were greater than Sodom. This is a prophet's way of getting the people's attention.

God's vision of shalom, healing, resurrection and renewal embodies a righteousness that stretches all of us into a greater communion, a more generous kin-dom of healing and restoration.

When Abraham learns of the planned judgment against Sodom, he pleads with God. The two angels depart and their story is told in the troubling 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis. Sodom will suffer judgment in spite of Abraham's prayer.

Abraham's pleading with God brings us to a difficult place, to our own prayers of pleading. Who among us hasn't offered an urgent prayer for a loved one in need, at the unwelcome news of cancer or chronic illness? We have all offered prayers for children at the border, for vulnerable migrant families navigating coyotes and cruelty and harsh government policies all because they hope for a better life. Lord, have mercy..

We gasped together when the news of Nathan's fall and injuries was shared in worship two weeks ago. We give thanks for his prognosis for recovery and continue to pray for his healing. At Good Shepherd, we are grateful for the faithful ministry and leadership of this flock provided by Pr. Amy and we are glad to offer prayers of healing and well being for Nathan and the Zalk-Larson household.

Abraham's prayer is a particular prayer for a community where he envisions a gathering of 10 righteous will save even the unjust. While we may not have prayed this precise prayer, we all know variations of pleading with God.

The promise of this story is that prayer changes us and that prayer also changes God. God with us is also God in process, grace evolving and growing with the expanding universe. Prayer calls us to know ourselves as God's beloved and calls us to grow into the fullness of God's love.

Abraham practices righteousness by calling God to be merciful. Genesis 19 tells of the eventual destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. That's not the whole story. The prophet Ezekiel, after naming the judgment against Sodom cited earlier, speaks a surprising Gospel word just a few verses later in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel: *I will restore their fortunes, the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and I will restore your own fortunes along with theirs.* Ezekiel 16:53

God's ultimate work is about healing a broken world - that's the work of the cross, the good news of Jesus.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus is teaching us to pray our way into new community, the kingdom, the kin-dom of God. In this new community we know ourselves as God's blessed, beloved, broken people. I love the way this new community is embodied and practiced in the partnership, vision and shared works of justice and mercy embodied in this beloved flock, Good Shepherd Lutheran church.

God's new community comes to us in many surprising ways. In the summer of 2016, I discovered Gospel community keeping watch with my father. My parents were divorced when I was in college. It was a difficult and complicated matter that wounded us all

along the way. As my father's biological son, I found a way to hold on to resentment and a grudge toward my step-brothers, one of whom bears my name.

My stepbrother Mike lived with my father and stepmother during his middle school and high school years after my father remarried. We could be friendly together as we knew each other from long before my Dad remarried. Still, I always thought of my stepfamily as the people who took my father.

At my father's deathbed, I heard my stepbrother voice words of thanks and love to my father. He spoke of the abuse he suffered from his biological father and voiced gratitude to know a father who cared for him and had high expectations for him. It was a revelation to me to hear this grace in my father's story. I was old enough to know, but I had never opened myself to this storyline. In the shared grief of my father's death, there was a new path of love for my stepbrother and stepfamily. It came to me by grace and surprise.

By grace we are saved - this is not our own doing, it is the gift of God. Hallelujah! I am still learning how to pray, how to open myself to the mind of Christ, to God's expansive mercy and restoring justice.

So today, offer whatever prayers you bring. As we say in the communion liturgy - *Lift up your hearts, we lift them to the Lord.*

Lift your prayers of joy, lament, longing, wonder, gratitude knowing that they all are held in God's mercy. Abraham prays for the sake of a people. The Psalm promises that God will not forsake the work of God's hands. Rejoice today that God's response to our prayers is Christ's love poured out for you, for all God's people and all creation. Such generosity moves us to prayers of humble thanks.

And together we say, **Amen.**