

## Seventh Sunday After Pentecost – Naomi Brown

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

There is just something about the Lord's Prayer, something so shockingly peaceful and approachable about how Jesus prays, especially in Luke's gospel. While the liturgical version we recite each week is taken from the longer prayer in Matthew's gospel, in Luke, Jesus prays only five brief sentences, a mere 38 words in our translation. There is an immediacy and approachability to Jesus's words in Luke that runs counter to how we are typically taught to think about prayer. We are taught to remember that prayer is all about God, not about ourselves, to be conscious that we are giving God proper adoration and gratitude before we ask for anything. In the midst of approaches to prayer that require mental gymnastics to ensure that the proper state of mind is achieved, and the correct formula followed, the Lord's Prayer seems refreshingly simple, bold, and even impolite. Pastor Douglas John Hall writes of the Lord's Prayer, "It does not require of us that we become anything we are not already. It is a deeply *human* kind of prayer. It is a prayer for human beings, that is, for creatures *in need*." This prayer, like that of the friend knocking on the door at midnight, is shameless about requesting what is needed. This shamelessness comes from the confidence in the nature of the one hearing the prayer.

The parable that Jesus tells in this passage requires a little interpretation for a modern audience. Those hearing Jesus' words would not dream of a friend refusing to respond to their need for bread to serve a guest. The requirements of hospitality, friendship, and common decency would demand it. But even in the unlikely event that a friend would not readily provide when asked, the boldness of the one knocking on the door would require the friend to get out of bed and help. While our translation says *because of his persistence, he will get up and give him whatever he needs*, several commentaries have suggested that "shamelessness" or "avoidance of shame" would be a better translation than "persistence." Unlike in other parables, such as the persistent widow, we are not told that the man keeps knocking and knocking until his friend gives up and helps him out. Rather, the man confidently asks for what is needed, putting his friend in a situation that would embarrass and shame him in front of his community if he were to refuse. The point is something along the lines of: even in the unlikely event that friendship wouldn't be enough for a friend to respond to your request, the shame of refusing someone in need would be—and how much more so would it be with God, who is motivated to hear our prayers not only out of friendship with us, but also to preserve God's reputation as one who does what is right and proper. We can pray with simplicity and confidence, letting our needs be known to God, because we know we pray to One whose nature it is to give good gifts to those who ask.

In today's Genesis passage, we encounter Abraham speaking boldly with God, asking for the city to be saved, and even reminding God that God's reputation as just is on the line here. Abraham's confident prayer is fascinating, and seems to me to be in the same sort of attitude of the bold, simple prayer of Jesus in Luke. But what I find most fascinating in this morning's Old Testament passage is God's response. Our reading begins with God acknowledging the outcry against Sodom. God has heard the cry for justice and is eager to respond accordingly. But then we hear Abraham pleading for the city to be spared on behalf of the righteous, and God is equally eager to respond with mercy. Both the cries of the oppressed and victimized for justice and of the

righteous for mercy are heard, felt, and accepted by God. God desires to bring an end to the evil of this city, but also desires to show mercy, even to the violent, the oppressors, and the abusers. God does not promise to save only the righteous in the city, but to save the whole city for the sake of the righteous. This is a reversal of much of the prophets, where the sins of the people are held in common and bring down judgement against the whole community. In this passage, God promises that the righteousness of a few individuals would bring down mercy for the whole city.

But what is fascinating about this passage is that God does not seem conflicted between these two desires: justice and mercy. We see no wavering, no decision to compromise one for the other. While from our vantage point these two ideals may seem to be in conflict, our God of paradox weaves the fullness of both into all actions, desiring both absolute justice and complete mercy. We see these two aspects of God's nature in our passage from Colossians as well. Here, Paul uses vivid language to describe the mercy God has given us: *when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh*, Paul writes, *God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.* But Paul immediately goes on to speak of the justice God has brought forth on behalf of the oppressed, when Christ *disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them.* Thus the cross as Paul understands it is a means of both mercy and justice, not in conflict, but brought together in one act, the death of Jesus Christ.

I am grateful that God hears and responds to bold prayers for justice and for mercy. It is beautiful, poetic, and mysterious to be able to pray for both the oppressed and the oppressors and to know that God is eager to hear and respond to the needs of both. But there is another, more desperate undertone to our joining with Abraham in the plea that justice and mercy be made one. When I see children locked in cages, when I hear of war ravaging people already decimated by colonial greed and exploitation, when I sit with a student who has been the victim of abuse or trauma, I want God to bring justice, to put an end to these evils at whatever cost to the oppressors. But I also want mercy, not only out of a desire to see redemption for each human, but also selfishly, for my own preservation. Because I know that even if there were any counted among the righteous in Sodom, they were not innocent of the city's evil. They enjoyed the protections and wealth and privilege afforded them by this city that exploited rather than welcomed the alien and the visitor. And I know that even if I fight against the evils in our world, I am so often in a position that benefits from these very oppressions. Though I made no choice for it to be so, my wealth, comfort, and security are enmeshed in a system and a nation that exploits and holds down the poor, the foreigners, the sick, the marginalized. This realization leaves me pleading as boldly as Abraham that God may have mercy.

Finding myself in this place, raising a cry for oppression and violence to cease while also pleading for mercy for those who oppress, or who, like me, benefit from oppression, I am forced to evaluate what sort of justice and what sort of mercy I am praying for. In [The Very Good Gospel](#), Lisa Sharon Harper reminds us that the gospel isn't good news unless it is good news for everyone. If the mercy I pray for allows evil to continue unchecked, the good news is not good enough for the oppressed. But if the justice I ask God to bring is vengeful and retributive, the good news is not good enough for the oppressor. To enter into the seeming paradox of God's

mercy and God's justice, we must understand that these are not separate and competing ideas, but harmonious. God desires to bring the restoration of Shalom to God's people, to restore us to right relationship with the self, the other, the world, and with God. This Shalom requires that the systems and structures that oppress be destroyed and that individuals who oppress be restored. So when the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, the prayer Jesus provides is a prayer for Shalom, for justice and mercy made one. The Kingdom Jesus asks God to bring is the Kingdom of Shalom. It is a Kingdom where each person has their daily needs met, where all forgive and are forgiven, and where we are not given over to times of trial. When we pray, we pray for that which is near to the heart of both God and humanity: mercy, justice, restoration. As Pastor Emrys Tyler notes in his commentary on our passage from Genesis, "Following in Abraham's footsteps, the church hopes for righteousness. Though atrocities abound, the church prays for compassion rather than retribution. Our worship reflects no strident self-righteousness, but a desire for the smallest seeds of righteousness to be preserved and to grow."

This understanding of God's desire for complete justice and mercy through the work of restoration gives direction to our prayer. We can pray for that which seems to us impossible to reconcile, pray that these seemingly opposing values both be brought forth in fullness. We can trust that God can find a way to bring about that which we cannot imagine. But where does that leave our actions? Our prayers might be able to handle mystery and uncertainty, but action by its definition must be concrete. How do we know how to act with both justice and mercy?

To explore this question, let's head back to Sodom. Let us imagine that there is in fact a group of righteous within the city, maybe fifty, maybe just ten. While they don't know of the conversation Abraham is having with God, they know that they are living in a city of wickedness. And each day they live within the city walls, they are faced with a choice. The righteous of Sodom can leave, turn their backs on the city in protest and leave Sodom to face God's justice. And with the city destroyed, great evil that may otherwise have carried on unchecked is ceased. Or the righteous can stay and continue to benefit from the protections of the city. The "quota" of righteousness is met and the city is spared, but continues on with its oppression and violence. The righteous work quietly, meeting travelers in the square and offering them their protection, or tending to those victimized by the city. The third choice for the righteous of Sodom is to stay, but to risk losing what they gain from the city's evil by calling for repentance, for the end of oppression and violence, putting their own security on the line. In this case, the city is spared for the sake of the righteous, and most likely it continues in its wickedness unabated. But there is a chance, however small, that the prophetic voice of the righteous begins to change the city, a slim hope that individuals and communities are redeemed and restored.

So what is the correct choice for the righteous? Frankly, I don't know. I believe there are evils that simply need to be ceased, and Jesus himself tells his disciples there is a time and place for shaking the dust from your feet and walking away in protest. But if all the righteous leave, who will care for the hurt and vulnerable within the city gates? And is the hope that maybe the voice of the righteous could bring about change in the city enough to justify the continuation of oppression in the meantime?

I wish I could ask these questions as hypotheticals, but the truth is, these are questions I ask myself over and over, as I know many of you do as well. While my awareness of my own apathy, complicity, and selfishness makes me hesitant to take a label of “righteous” upon myself, I do try to pay attention to the systems and structures around me, to acknowledge that which does harm and to strive to change what is within my power, and to call on others to change that which is within theirs. And I know that I am complicit in oppression, and not just on the national scale. I get my paycheck each week from an institution that has chosen to remain ensnared in white supremacy, that speaks of community but denies this to individuals who are LGBTQ, that makes choices out of fear rather than hope or virtue. What do I do with the knowledge that my well-being and comfort come to me from systems that I see bringing about harm? How do I work for both justice and mercy in the messiness of the real world? Once again, I don’t know. But I know that we are here in the church of a God who dwells not only among us, but also within us. When in situations where no path seems to be leading to the restoration of Shalom, I am grateful that we are not left alone, weighing out the potential effects of our choices on some scale of morality. Just as a father delights in giving good gifts to his children, so our heavenly Father delights in giving us the Holy Spirit, to guide us, comfort us, and walk with us on the path to a Kingdom where mercy and justice flow as one.