

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

THE GRAND BARGAIN

Genesis 18:20-32

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12)

Analysis by Bruce K Modahl

20Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! 21I 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."

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

DIAGNOSIS: Negotiating with God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Poor Miserable Sinners

Those of us familiar with The Lutheran Hymnal will remember saying Sunday after Sunday “I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities.” “In bondage to sin” (LBW) and “captive to sin” (ELW) better capture what we are after. We push the diagnosis to the point where we have to look away from ourselves and to God because we do not have the resources to break free from our bondage to sin. On our own we shall always be poor miserable sinners.

The Lord told Abraham he has word of the very grave sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. God is on his way to see for himself. The text does not tell us what this grave sin is.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Not a Minyan to Be Found

Abraham stood before the Lord and began to negotiate on behalf of the poor miserable sinners in the cities. “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?” Abraham rebuked God saying, “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked. Far be it from you!” The Hebrew root (ch. 11) translated here as “far be it” means pollute, defile, profane. Brueggemann suggests “That is profane” is a better translation. Sibley Towner claims “Shame on you” comes closer to Abraham’s tone. When Jeremiah and Peter rebuked the Lord they were rebuked in the harshest of terms. God

rescinded his call to Jeremiah. Jesus called Peter Satan. Abraham received no such rebuke from God. God rather joins the negotiations. In fact God gives in as Abraham drives the bargain lower. Abraham stopped at ten. The divine presence dwelt with the assembly if ten people gathered for worship or the study of Torah. The required ten are called a “minyan” from the Hebrew root mnh, meaning to count. Not even ten people in the city have faith in God.

Why did Abraham stop the bargaining at ten? Did the minyan law trump God’s mercy? Shame on you Abraham for stopping at ten. Abraham could have bargained God down to one and then went to Sodom ahead of God to be the one righteous person in the city for whose sake God would not sweep away the place and all its inhabitants. Abraham held the trump. The trump was God’s promise to Abraham.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (External Problem): Fire and Brimstone
We already know the final diagnosis. “The Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven. Early the next morning Abraham stood in the place where he had met with God and saw the smoke of the land.”

Yet in the midst of this we hear “When God destroyed the cities of the Plain God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow.” In the midst of the destruction we hear a word of promise.

PROGNOSIS: God Drives a Blessed Bargain

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Righteous One
God did what Abraham could not do. God the Father breathed the Word. The Holy Spirit, breath of God, carried the Word to the Virgin Mary’s womb and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God sent his only begotten Son into the world as the one righteous person. But God made his Son to be sin (2 Corinthians

5:21). Jesus was swept away to the grave as were the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and all humanity of every generation. But this Righteous One, Jesus, God's only begotten Son, God raised from the dead. Resurrection is God's trump. God raised Jesus as the first born of a whole new creation. As we live in Jesus by our baptismal faith we become the righteousness of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Faithful Prayer

A friend of mine observed that many people regard prayer as pebbles we throw against God's window trying to get his attention. If we could weigh those pebbles bargaining would represent most of the weight.

We already have God's attention. God is with us and yearning to be in conversation with us. I was stunned by a brief paragraph about the prayers of the faithful. It has changed how I pray and how often and with what urgency I pray:

Now if when we pray we indeed pray as one with the Son, then our prayer belongs to the Son's part in the mutual knowing and willing of the Father, Son and Spirit. Our prayer is not just addressed to divine providence; it participates in it. Why should we bother to tell God what we think should happen? Because our doing so occurs within the triune act of knowing and choosing what will happen (Robert W. Jenson, "Speech to, for, and about the Triune God" in *Seeking New Directions for Lutheranism*, p. 120).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Faithful Minions

Surely, dear reader, you did not think I could resist the play on the words "minyan" and

"minion." In fact, I am compelled to do so upon discovering in my Shorter Oxford English Dictionary that minion is of French origin and it means a lover. Moreover, says Oxford, it is chiefly a derogatory word for lover. Then it is a perfect term for us at-the-same-time-sinner-and-saint lovers of God. As God's

minions we get to proclaim the good news about the God who gives us such a great bargain. We proclaim the good news. In Jesus, God takes all our sins and gives us in their place the blessings of forgiveness and new life now and forever. Like Abraham we take up the cause of sinners, ourselves included. We take up the cause confident in God's promises. Furthermore, as faithful minions we get to do all the things Jesus did. By our proclamation and actions we give witness to the new creation already cropping up among us.