

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for World Communion, October 4, 2009
Lessons: Genesis 18:20-33, John 9:1-7, and Matthew 5:13-16

SOMEONE HAS TO CARE

Abraham's contention with God over the fate of the legendary evil city of Sodom is amusing but also puzzling. On the light side, he sounds like a Middle Eastern buyer dickering for a lower price on some goods, but on the heavier side, he risks the wrath of God by taking the side of the cruel city. God is not neutral about the hurts and griefs inflicted upon vulnerable people by those who delight in doing harm. So, Abraham is not just having a little fun with God; he is putting himself into a precarious position of standing against God and God's justice for the sake of people who may be very few in number and not particularly commendable.

Why does Abraham do something so risky? He is doing exactly what God wants him to do. God's judgment untempered by compassion would be terrifying, and somebody has to care. The lives of people in this world have to matter, and God it seems does not want to be left as the only one to whom they matter.¹

So, how many righteous people does it take to turn aside the consequences of God's judgment? Abraham starts with fifty and, having secured God's agreement, haggles the number down to ten, coincidentally the number of adults Judaism requires for public worship, a minyan or quorum for the community at prayer. So few, and yet Jesus promises that wherever two or three gather in his name he will be with them. There is a theme here I find it hard to grasp from the modern point of view. We are statistically minded. We want majorities and super majorities. God wants at least a few people to care, to come before God to pray for, plead for, and often mourn for a gruelingly troubled and self-destructive world.

Abraham and Sodom form a paradigm for people who love God and, therefore, care about God's love for the world. Sodom is the legendary evil city – utterly evil, as no city you or I have ever known can be. Human beings do not come divided between utterly good and utterly evil, nor do cities. Sodom is the logical extreme, Abraham the model.

Moses follows that model. After the Israelites have abandoned the God who had just brought them out of their slavery in Egypt, God has this telling exchange with Moses. "The LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make

a great nation.” What a temptation! Moses has endured the people’s constant grumbling, plaguing him with complaints. Surely, he has the right to feel betrayed when they turn so quickly to self-indulgent idolatry while he is up on the mountain representing them to God. Would he not be justified to say, “You know, God, I’m with you on this one; if you’ll go with me and lead me, I’ll go on without them, these people who obviously don’t care about you anyway”? But Moses must not yield to that temptation to accept God’s judgment that he is the faithful one who is saved and his people the unfaithful who can be let go their own way without God. Instead, Moses does exactly what God wants him to do: he mediates for the people, even though they do not deserve it. Come what may, Moses stands with God against the people but also with the people against God. Such is the calling and task of the mediator, the prophet, and is it not the calling, the prophetic task, of all who love God?

The answer is given to us in the living form of Jesus himself, who stood between God and us and would not give up on either. So, he was torn apart. That’s why the table is set with the elements of his passion. He who would not abandon God or this world’s people was crucified between the two. He represents in his broken body God’s love for this world and, at the same time, this world’s desperate need to be forgiven, healed, and restored to God. On the cross, he suffers humanity’s hatred for the ways of God and scorn for God’s love; at the same time, he suffers God’s judgment upon us for all our heartless indifference and ruthless cruelties toward each other. Jesus suffers abandonment by the people, including his own disciples (his friends), and he suffers also and terribly what feels to him like abandonment by God. Talk about being caught in the middle!

Jesus calls us to follow him – we, the community that puts our collective faith in him. What does it mean to follow him? Preach a message about him? How easy. Welcome those who accept that message and leave behind those who don’t? How convenient. Then we become the fellowship of kindred minds set comfortably apart from the cruelties of the unbelieving world and from its sufferings and griefs as well. But, then, have we answered Jesus’ call to follow him, or have we instead yielded to the temptation Moses resists? *Never mind those unfaithful people, Moses. Get out of the way so I can destroy them in judgment, and I’ll fulfill the promise through you.* How much of Christian thought, preaching, and history is explained by that temptation! We are the chosen, the elect, the saved, the born-again, the righteous, the ones bound for heaven. *Sure, God, take us with you, and we’ll be glad to get out your way and let you blast the rest with your judgment.* If we take that attitude, we fail. God wants representatives who will stand with the people under judgment, who will refuse to stop caring and get out of the way, because God will not stop caring.

What then is World Communion? Well, if it is just an annual show of fictitious unity among the churches and of transcendent unity in Christ’s whole church, then I’m not sure what purpose it serves other than irony. But since 1980, our celebration of World

Communion has been linked to peacemaking as “the believer’s calling.” Peacemaking involves stepping into the middle, because warring factions want victory, not peace. People who feel they have been wronged tend to want retribution, not reconciliation. The world calls peacemakers meddlers, troublemakers, and outside agitators. But the requirement for a peacemaker is to care about the alienated parties and not just one of them. Caring about both, however, can cause the peacemaker to lose the favor of both because hostile parties see such caring as taking the other’s side. That’s the risk we are called to take.

To follow Jesus in his way is to concede neither our love for God nor our love for this world and its people. It is to refuse the religious politics which says God loves these people over here but not those other people over there. We’re not asked to approve of what either is doing but only to care. We become peacemakers as we grow convinced of God’s love for the people and God’s longing for restoration rather than retribution.

I hope we will consider peacemaking an important part of our outreach into our communities. Jesus teaches his disciples that assigning blame does not solve problems. They are content to figure out who is to blame for the blindness of the man born without sight. Jesus heals him, and in his healing God’s true glory is revealed.

We can’t always heal. In fact, there is so much wrong and suffering we cannot heal that it hurts to think about it. But here is a mystery: somehow it matters that we care. The world so easily dismisses incidents of unfairness and cruelty. *Oh well, tough luck. Those things happen. Let’s be thankful it didn’t happen to us.* We need to let God know and let people know in honest, humble ways that we care, even when we have no power to help. It is the broken body of the Mediator that holds God and the world together. We are his community in this world God loves. It matters that we don’t stop caring. Amen.

1. For more, not only on this interpretation of Abraham’s contention with God and that of Moses also, but on the responsibility of the Christian community not to acquiesce to the judgment that people are rejected, see Jan Bonda’s book, *The One Purpose of God: an Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, translated by Reinder Bruinsma, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998 (original, 1993).