“Bargaining with God”

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I’m sure that I must have mentioned to you before now that one of my favorite books for years was *Mr. God, This is Anna*, attributed to an author named Fynn and supposedly autobiographical. I was quite dismayed to learn that it was actually a fiction written by someone named Sydney Hopkins. What remains unchanged in my considering the book, though, was the lesson I learned from the way the character Anna spoke to her friend, Mr. God. Her conversations were prayers—in the way that ours may be. Her discussions were based on trust—in the way that ours may be. For Anna, a “waif” that is cared for by a young man that happens to discover her on the foggy docks, God is accessible and responsive, and *mysterious*. Anna has a relationship with God that we might well envy.

And so does Abraham. How else can we explain the audacity with which Abraham works to *change God’s mind*. It is from the encounter with Abraham on God’s way to destroy the sinful cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, that I landed on the title for this sermon. The scene can almost seem comical if you imagine the exchange as somehow produced on stage instead of as a response to a community engaged in behaviors distinct from love. If we avoid mention of the core issue in Abraham’s pleas, which is justice, we could imagine instead something like a child pleading with their parent: “Will you give me ten dollars so I can go to the movies with my friend?” “Sure.” “OK, will you give me $15 instead, so that I can buy popcorn too?” “I suppose so.” “Great! We want to go for pizza after that. Can you give me $25, after all?” “All this sounds essentially reasonable, I suppose.” But Abraham’s entertainment is not what is at stake in his exchange with God. What may sound like manipulative bargaining in our supposed conversation between parent and child sounds instead like a plea for justice when Abraham sets out to change what happens to the sinful cities.

You may notice that I have changed the description of Abraham’s goal. You see, Abraham is in conversation with his God not for himself, but for the good people of Sodom and Gomorrah. What we may have understood to be gradual ramping up of what is at stake, of how God might give in is, rather, a widening of mercy; a broadening of those who are served with justice. Abraham asks the God whom he trusts to do what is right. That is a prayer, a conversation I can get behind. How about you?

I wonder if your own conversations with God are like this—and I would add, are like mine often are. I have the sense that many of our prayers stray from the simple ones described by Anne Lamott as “Thank you, help me, and wow.” Those set prayers we might offer at morning and evening or over prayers are different, aren’t they, from those we offer when we are afraid, or alone, or hurt, or sad? In which prayers do we rest in our trust in God’s faithfulness and mercy and in which do we bargain instead to gain what we might desire?

If you wonder about the efficacy of prayer or about its proper place, its proper tone, or its proper words, you must know that you are not alone. Our questions land in a long line of uncertainty, of wandering through holy mystery, which we can trace to Jesus’ first disciples, our models of faithful following. “Lord, teach us to pray.” And Jesus does. We pray together each week with the words of the Lord’s prayer, mixing together elements presented in today’s text from Luke as well as the version from Matthew. Somehow, this week, I took more focused note of the three places I have the single line, “Give us this day our daily bread” mounted in my home: carved on wood in my largest refrigerator magnet, in a tile on a wrought iron frame hung on the wall, and on a simple slip of paper. For me, this line has become a reminder that God will provide me with what I *need* each day. My latching on to it is representative of my trust—and also of my need to remember to trust.

The line about which I have had most discussion is one for which different communities of faith have chosen different translations. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” What is meant by trespassing or sinning is sometimes translated from the Greek *hamartia*, which means most literally, “missing the mark.” Sin, you see, isn’t always a blatant error or diabolical misdeed. In relationship with God and with one another, we sometimes just don’t get things quite right. In our human self-centeredness, we sometimes think of ourselves before we love. This, it seems to me, is how we sin. Let’s think again about Abraham. His prayer, his conversation is *for others*, and he nearly wheedles his way into God’s forgiving them. How might we wheedle for others if we think about the notion of debts. It is from Matthew that we learn this version of the Lord’s prayer. Imagine if we began to pray for ourselves and for others that our debts would be forgiven. In Matthew’s terms, we might be ushering in a whole new sense of jubilee. We might be praying for more worldly justice as we also pray for ourselves and our daily needs.

I had been thinking about Abraham’s prayers and the disciples longing to know how to pray when I read a comment on Facebook. I had posted on my page for all to see a commentary from the Rev. Roy Terry regarding the new detention center in the Florida Everglades. I am disturbed by its construction and its purpose, because I believe we owe to every person and particularly to “the least of these” the love and compassion of providing shelter, clothing, food, and companionship to those who need it. A former parishioner of mine responded with a comment that reduced the human beings who are being subjected to inhumane conditions to being “illegal.” I am taking the time to speak about this here, not reiterating all the facts we know about the individuals who have been incarcerated unjustly, because how we respond to the treatment of others is how we respond to Jesus. Jesus told us so in Matthew 25. What we do and don’t do for and to the “least of these” is what we do and don’t do to and for Jesus. So, today, as we think about what our prayers sound like, I wonder if we might pray even more earnestly for all those worldwide who are suffering from injustice; for those whose debts have gone unforgiven; for those whose sins are no greater than our own—or whose sins are greater, but are no less forgiven than our own, by God. Our God hears our prayers and responds with mercy and with justice. Through the gift of Jesus and his saving act, our own sins, trespasses, our own debts are forgiven. *Humanity* metes out destruction and holds tight to debts while condemning others. So, how must we pray and how must we live?

When it comes time for us to pray together again this morning, in the words we have been given by Jesus, teaching us how to have a conversation with our God, I hope we also can pause for a moment on the earlier petition: “Thy kin-dom come; thy will be done, on earth *as it is in heaven.”* No, we are not praying for God to provide us life as we know it, but life and love as God would provide it. In heaven, we are not indebted to a bank or to each other; in heaven, our sins are forgiven, and so are the sins of every human being, thanks to Jesus. So, as we pray this morning, in whatever words our conversation is led to include, we pray for ourselves and for the world, that we might be brought to equity, mercy, justice, and love as it is in heaven. May we then be strengthened to *do* God’s will. Amen.