

### ***Bargaining With God***

Jason Boyd; July 25, 2010

Kirkland Congregational Church; Kirkland, WA

Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

Holy Humor Sunday has come and gone, but I can't resist – just one more joke, since it actually relates to what we heard in the Bible readings today.

*A man was circling the block searching for a parking spot. Finally, after the third time around, he prays, "God, if you help me find a parking spot, I will go to church every Sunday and tithe ten percent of my income." Immediately, a spot opens up, and the man prays, "Never mind, I found one."*

If you've ever been in prayer, and felt as though you were bargaining with God, you're not alone. Making promises to God, of the "if only" variety, is pretty common. Perhaps as a child you made promises to God that if only God would bring you a puppy you would be nicer to your siblings. Or something like that. Maybe you make the same promises to God as an adult! Or maybe it's something a bit less of a direct exchange, but something along the lines of "get me through some experience" and some behavior will change on your part.

Wouldn't it be something if one day, right in the middle of a prayer – particularly that kind of prayer -- God talked back to us? I mean out loud, so you could hear it. There you go, Dear God, I pray for such and such, and God answers you right back. Dear God, if you get me through this weekend with my relatives I will double my giving to the church.

And then it happens, the clouds part and you hear the voice on high – OK, you've got a deal. Let's do that. And you realize you've got a dilemma. God always keeps promises, you know that you'll get through that difficult weekend just fine, but now you have to figure out how you're going to come up with that money that you just promised God you'd give, because not only is God watching you, God is talking directly to you!

Maybe this is part of why God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit instead of a more direct form of communication – because God knows we wouldn't know what to do.

That wasn't quite what was going on with Abraham, but you can see some of the same elements. The verses from Genesis are more of a conversation than a prayer in which we might promise God something specific – I mean, God *was* talking back. God was answering very directly. Abraham was pretty much bargaining with God. We hear that in the verses I read, but I want to read some of them to you from another translation, *The Message*, and take note of the tone.

*God continued, "The cries of the victims in Sodom and Gomorrah are deafening; the sin of those cities is immense. I'm going down to see for myself, see if what they're doing is as bad as it sounds. Then I'll know."*

*The men set out for Sodom, but Abraham stood in God's path, blocking his way. Abraham confronted him, "Are you serious? Are you planning on getting rid of the good people right along with the bad? What if there are fifty decent people left in the city; will you lump the good with the bad and get rid of the lot? Wouldn't you spare the city for the sake of those fifty innocents? I can't believe you'd do that, kill off the good and the bad alike as if there were no difference between them. Doesn't the Judge of all the Earth judge with justice?"*

*God said, "If I find fifty decent people in the city of Sodom, I'll spare the place just for them."*

*Abraham came back, "Do I, a mere mortal made from a handful of dirt, dare open my mouth again to my Master? What if the fifty fall short by five—would you destroy the city because of those missing five?"*

*He said, "I won't destroy it if there are forty-five."*

*Abraham spoke up again, "What if you only find forty?"*

*"Neither will I destroy it if for forty."*

*He said, "Master, don't be irritated with me, but what if only thirty are found?"*

*"No, I won't do it if I find thirty."*

*He pushed on, "I know I'm trying your patience, Master, but how about for twenty?"*

*"I won't destroy it for twenty."*

*He wouldn't quit, "Don't get angry, Master—this is the last time. What if you only come up with ten?"*

*"For the sake of only ten, I won't destroy the city."*

Yeah, bargaining. Abraham was one persistent guy. When you think of the images of the Old Testament God, you're just expecting to hear God tell Abraham to be quiet or face the consequences himself. But that just wouldn't be God's nature. Abraham understood that he had been invited into this conversation with God, and this is an important thing for us to remember. We are invited into conversation with

God. Unlike with Abraham, the verbal portion may only be in one direction, but God invites us to converse, to talk, to share, to be in relationship.

God invites us to raise tough questions, like Abraham did. Abraham didn't believe that God could ignore the differences between those who did right in life and those who did wrong. We know that God loves all, but like Abraham, we also call out to God seeking the justice God seeks. This is a faithful act for us, one that reminds God that we also desire to be in relationship. Also like Abraham, we know that God listens to us, our cries, what lies on our hearts. You noticed that in Abraham's case, the more he said, the more God did – I think there's something important to take from this: Prayer Matters! Prayer makes a difference!

In our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, we find ourselves in a similar situation to the original disciples of Christ when it comes to prayer. We may wonder how to pray, we might well ask Jesus to teach us how to pray – as the original twelve did. But, he didn't give them the words to pray in today's lesson from Luke, he taught them about God's nature.

Now I've been waiting to say that sentence because at first glance it sounds a little as though I didn't actually pay attention to what I just read to you from the Gospel according to Luke. *He didn't give them the words to say, he taught them about God's nature.* And so you might look at me and say, "Um, Jason, Jesus taught them the Lord's Prayer. All the words." Well, yes, he did. But let's go through those words, as we pray them here at Kirkland Congregational.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.*

Now let's break it down...

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*

We acknowledge who God is, and depending on who we are, we might say Father and/or Mother, we might say Creator. And any term, Father, Mother, Creator, would be an understatement for who God is for us. We know that and God knows that, so our use of the word *hallowed* is important, because with it we are proclaiming God to be holy, above all, and certainly beyond which our words can ever describe.

*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

In prayer we do often ask for our own needs, real or perceived, to be met. But here, we're asking for God's realm to come be here on earth, for this world to become as it is in God's world. And we might remind ourselves that God expects us to be working for this, as God's instruments.

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

OK! So now we get to our own needs! Well maybe, maybe not. We haven't asked for our daily commute to be traffic-free, although that would be nice. We haven't asked for the daily lottery numbers to show up in our email. We do ask God to meet our needs, but we do so in humility, and in a way that should help us to see that God knows our needs better than we do. Bread, not caviar, not chateaubriand. So many of the things we want in a consumerist society are not needs; we want them, but we don't need them. Bread – which we might also symbolically look at as the nourishment of life – we need, and we ask only for our own, not for so much that there isn't enough for everyone.

*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

I have on occasion heard this prayer prayed as “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” If it were left up to me to decide, those would be the words that were always said – it just works better. Debts or trespasses, neither quite cuts it in the English language. I'll gladly forgive everyone else's student loan debt if mine gets forgiven – that isn't quite what this is about. We acknowledge our own sin, both against God and against God's creation. We know that we receive God's forgiveness, but it is important for us to ask for it, to be able to name for God that we know we've done wrong. And we know that this forgiveness is a blessed gift, one that God wants us to share with others.

We throw that word ‘as’ in there – think about this, we're asking God to forgive us and proclaiming we will forgive others – that sounds like a promise. And we're saying that we know that our ability to receive forgiveness – not God's ability to give it, but our ability to receive it -- is inextricably linked to our ability to forgive others.

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

Sometimes we mess up. There's a joke that says this line as “lead me not into temptation, I can find it myself.” That may be part of the problem! Sometimes we're pretty good at that – so we do need to seek God's help in recognizing it before we find ourselves wrapped up in something. We know that feeling when the Holy Spirit comes and we find ourselves realizing that maybe we ought not do something, or

that we ought to do it differently – and we pray that God will keep doing this for us, as we know that God will. Jesus even told us so later in the verse.

*For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.*

And we offer more praise to this amazing God who loves us so dearly, and wants so much to be in relationship with us. Always.

So ultimately, perhaps prayer is a bargain with God, just not in the way we see it. The bargain has already been made, by God. We are offered the most incredible, unending, and unconditional love that have ever existed. And we are asked to be in relationship with the one who offers it. Such is the nature of our amazing Still Speaking God. With our words, with our actions, with our hearts, minds, and souls, we acknowledge that we need this love from God and that we need to do what we can to make sure others know this too. Now that's a bargain. And that's a prayer. Amen.