

*July 24, 2022; Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA*

This story Jesus tells in today's gospel paints an odd picture of God. At first blush, it seems as if God is a lazy guy on the couch who needs to be prodded over and over again before acting. "If you pester God enough," he seems to be saying, "if you annoy him like somebody banging on a door in the middle of the night, sooner or later he'll give in just to get you to clam up!" so prayer becomes a way of making a reluctant God... do something! What an odd image of God indeed!

And the story we hear in Genesis seems to follow along the same lines. It seems as though Abraham needs to convince God to be merciful, that God really wants to be violent and destructive and thankfully merciful and graceful Abraham is there to talk some sense! Okay, well, since these stories seem to fly in the face of everything else we know about God, something else must be going on here. Something about prayer and who the God is that we speak our deepest desires toward.

Perhaps we can imagine the scene in Genesis. Abraham, standing on a hillside, looking over the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities that even then were bywords for self-indulgence, for selfish pride and the neglect of the needs of others. In the last hundred or so years, we have distorted the stories and made them to fit a new and strange agenda, but over the centuries "Sodom and Gomorrah" were well known symbols of the hurt and harm we can cause when we stop caring for one another's vulnerabilities and embrace our temptations toward selfishness.

So there is Abraham looking over these symbolic cities wondering aloud just who this God is that he has chosen to follow. Abraham had been told to leave all that he had known, to travel to a place he'd never seen, to follow this God into the unknown not only for his sake but the sake of so many they would be greater than the stars in the night sky. He trusted in this God, put his faith in this

God, and this God proved trustworthy. As he stood on that hillside, Ishmael had already been born to Hagar and Isaac has been promised to Sarah. The promise was being fulfilled. And now Abraham wonders aloud, Just how merciful, how caring, just how graceful is this God, this God who *keeps* promises? How far does this mercy extend?

There is a way of being in the world, a way of learning our values. We learn from the world that we are to live by grabbing what we can, taking it and holding for ourselves, even at a cost to others. We compete and some win and some lose and that's just what it means to be a human being, we learn. We learn to live reciprocally, showing kindness to those who show us kindness, generosity to the generous. Retribution and vengeance are the accepted way of things. And more, we learn that this is natural, inevitable, and maybe even good.

It can be so easy for us to learn from the world a way of living that says that it's okay to be selfish, that everyone is so I can be too, that we should live and let live, that my life is none of your business and your life is none of my concern. All of us learn that lesson; all of us live that lesson. When other close their hands and turn away from us, it becomes easier to turn away from others in response. When somebody betrays our trust and moves on, the hurt can leave us closed off, reluctant to trust somebody else, and our world becomes less connected. When somebody uses their status or power to make us feel small, we too easily buy the story that there are those above us and those beneath us and we should do what we can to move up.

And so Abraham stands on this hillside, wondering, *is this what this God is like?* This God who has called me to a new land, sustained and guided me, kept promises to me... Is God like this, or is there something different happening here?

And yes, we know how the rest of the story is written—we have long been projecting our vengeance onto God. But here, we get a glimpse of something different. This one who has seen God’s graceful mercy now wrestles with the question of just how graceful this One is, just how far divine mercy might extend.

“Jesus,” the disciples ask, “teach us to pray. Teach us how to ask for the things we want.” The disciples are making that easy mistake, that mistake that we too so often make: assuming that God is a bigger version of ourselves, operates by the same rules of reciprocity. “Teach us what to do to get what we want.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Jesus tells them. “In God, there is endless generosity. The one who made the endless universe, loves endlessly and gives endlessly.” And it is, of course, this love, this generosity, that Jesus so perfectly embodies in giving everything, in going to the cross for the sake of humanity, for the sake of all of us.

It’s not that God needs to be prodded into action. It’s not that God needs to be convinced to be merciful. It’s that we need to be reminded over and over again that God does not operate in the same ways as the world we see around us.

And that, I think is a big part of what prayer is. When we pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven,” we are speaking rooting ourselves more fully in God’s reality. When we say, “Give us this day our daily bread,” we are reminded that we are sustained by a love and grace that comes to us feely and comes most fully alive when share with others. When we say, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive others,” we are being brought more fully into a new way of being in the world, a new way that lets go of resentments, lets go of a need to get even, and instead embraces the grace and generosity of the one who welcomes us always.

In prayer, this prayer and other prayers, we remember who God is, what God has done for us and to us, and the ways that we are made able to live differently in this world.

As Abraham witnessed God's faithfulness, God's trustworthiness, and came to move ever more deeply into God's reality, so too have we seen God's loving faithfulness, shown to us at the baptismal font and altar table.

And being rooted, over and over, in this one who is generosity, who embodies God's graceful giving, we are set free from the ways of the world we have learned. When we are hurt by others we are free to resist the temptation to turn away, to close ourselves off, to close our fists and hold on to what we have; we are free instead to open ourselves and to say, "God, may your kingdom come on earth and as you have reached out to me may I reach out to others who are hurting."

When we are scared and vulnerable we are free to say, "God, holy is your name: Emmanuel—God-with-us." And we remember that our fears and vulnerabilities are real and they matter but they never separate us from God, they can never take away the cross that is on our forehead; we never have to fear being without the one who holds us forever.

Standing on the hillside, looking over our world, we can ask ourselves with Abraham, Is God really as generous, as giving, as graceful and God seems to be? And we can trust God's answer in return: You are my child, my Beloved, and with you I am well pleased. May your Kingdom come indeed, O God. Amen.