

[\[Link to audio recording.\]](#)

There's a little background to explore in today's first reading. This excerpt from Genesis comes just after Abraham and Sarah have been visited by three strangers who turn out to be messengers from God. (That's the reading we heard last week.) As they leave, God debates whether or not to tell Abraham about the planned destruction of Sodom, before deciding that if Abraham is going to be trusted with bringing forth generations of faithful people, he should be let in on what's about to happen.

Why was Sodom slated to be destroyed? In another bible verse, God says, "This was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not help the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49 NRSV) In other words, they abandoned caring for the least among them. They forgot about loving their neighbor. And so, God decided that the whole city wasn't worth keeping around.

But Abraham hears this story and is concerned. Not only is his nephew Lot in the city, but he is sure there are some righteous people who deserve to be saved and he ends up bargaining with God!

There are two main ways of understanding this episode of bargaining with God and God relenting on destroying Sodom. The first is that God is testing Abraham for some reason. Even though God literally just promised Abraham a son and generations to come, there still needs to be one more test to double check that Abraham is up to it. So, God tells Abraham that Sodom will be destroyed but is waiting to see if Abraham will speak up. Will Abraham come to the defense of the righteous?

But there's another way of looking at it—that God is actually able to change God's mind.

For a lot of us, the notion of God's mind being changed is scary— isn't God supposed to be constant? If God can change God's mind, does that mean that God is not necessarily faithful? Can God renege on promises?

I will admit, I had trouble with this idea when I first heard it. It was in a sermon in my seminary chapel, preached by Dr. Ralph Klein, a phenomenal Old Testament scholar. He was preaching on the binding of Isaac, which appears just a few chapters later in Genesis, the story of how Abraham is told to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him, only to have God stop it all at the last minute. My mind rebelled against a god who could change, but I was introduced to an idea I find much richer than rigid constancy.

Perhaps it's best to think of God as faithful and trustworthy instead of necessarily constant. We know that God is faithful to God's people even when God's people prove unworthy of that faith—scripture shows us that time and time again. We trust that God will be faithful to God's nature, that God's desire for reconciliation will, in the end, win out.

Frankly, I'm okay with that. I'm okay with a god whose love is so deep and broad and unending that it will always win out.

God's nature is love. God's nature is mercy. God's nature is justice and wholeness and redemption.

So, when God tells Abraham what is about to happen to Sodom, Abraham appeals to God's *nature*, to God's love and mercy. And Abraham *trusts* that God will listen and relent. And, because God *is* trustworthy, Abraham's requests are met. In the end, the required number of ten righteous people are not found and the city is still destroyed, but the fact is that God still listened and was willing to do something different.

Think about it—this is *really* good news. After all, who else can be called out like this? Who else can be told that they aren't living up to their own identity? Who can be counted on to live up to their best self when something is pointed out to them?

Certainly not everyone, right? We've all had experience with teachers or bosses or political leaders who treat any suggestion that they might not be doing the best thing as a personal affront. Instead of hearing and really *listening* to what others are seeing, they write people off and continue to insularly behave however they wish. You've witnessed that, haven't you? And when that happens, all it does is tell others that those individuals aren't safe, that they *aren't* trustworthy, that they can't be counted on.

Take the example of a friend who says something hurtful. Maybe it's sexist or racist, or maybe it's just a little mean. When you tell that friend, "You hurt me with what you said. I'd prefer if you didn't make jokes about that or talk about that stuff around me," they respond with some like, "Ugh, it was just a joke!" or "Calm down, don't be whiny." Immediately, you know you can't trust that person with your best interests.

But who are the people in our lives who really listen to us, even if we're telling them something they don't want to hear? It's people who love us, right? Our parents, if we have a healthy relationship, or our good friends. Our spouses or partners, again, if we are in a healthy place. It's people who are more interested in a strong relationship than with winning or being right. People who truly want the best for others. And doesn't God truly want the best for us?

Sometimes people use this story to talk about persistence in prayer. If you just keep asking, eventually you'll wear God down, I guess? And, it's true, in this story Abraham kind of haggles God down from finding fifty righteous in the city to only needing to find ten. But I think it's less about Abraham's persistence than Abraham's *shamelessness*. Abraham has no qualms about coming to God with his request—and not just once, but multiple times!

In a way, Jesus encourages this same shamelessness in prayer with his words to his disciples in today's Gospel reading. First of all, Jesus tells them to pray addressing God as "Father." You might already know that the real word used here is "abba," a word that is more akin to

something like “dad,” the familiar way a child would address their father in a healthy and loving parent-child relationship.

If you have that kind of relationship with your parent, think back through your life with them. Did you ever hesitate to ask for something you wanted? Or did you just ask, knowing that even if they said no, it wouldn't destroy your relationship, right? When I asked my parents for a Nintendo Wii when they first came out, I was pretty sure they'd say no, but I knew it wouldn't hurt our relationship if I asked. I also knew that when it came to anything I truly *needed*, they would do whatever they could to provide it for me.

We're able to trust that our parent will listen to us, take what we have to say seriously, and respond in a way that is true to their nature. This is reiterated a few verses later when Jesus says, “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?” (Luke 11:11-12)

And Jesus gives another example, too, doesn't he? One that doesn't even have to do with parents or children at all, but general friendship and love we could have with anyone. When you reach a certain point with friends, you know you can ask for what you need without worrying that it will derail your relationship. You can ask for support, for forgiveness, for space, for help, trusting that they will be true to the nature of your friendship.

The point of all of this is that God's love for us is deeper and more faithful than any other love in our lives. Nothing we can do can change that love. It's part of God's nature, along with mercy and forgiveness and grace and joy and compassion. It's who God is.

So, don't be afraid to be a little shameless when you pray.

God is ready to listen.

Amen.