



Prayer in a Time of Trial



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Genesis 18:16-32
Luke 11:1-13

There was a bit of encouraging news last week at the end of a Washington Post editorial titled “How do we ‘stop this killing’?”: “Sunday in Wichita, what was originally planned as a protest march against police turned into a cookout after protest organizers and the police chief decided that sitting down together and breaking bread was a better way to open up communication and build trust. That’s a start.”¹

An on-line search turned up the local Wichita coverage. The morning after a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest in Wichita the previous week, Chief of Police Gordon Ramsay invited local Black Lives Matter leaders to talk about “what next?” Together they decided that instead of the protest scheduled for the coming Sunday—a week ago today—they would invite the community to the First Steps Cookout in a local park, hosted by police officers.

It turned out to be the afternoon of the same day three police officers in Baton Rouge were shot dead. Aimed at taking the first step toward building a relationship between police and the community, the morning horror made the afternoon in Wichita all the more powerful.

A thousand people came. The police provided food, cooked and served. Officers and community members young and old danced together, and took selfies. Police and children played basketball together. “It was a bonding moment,” said one mother, “where the police saw them as children and my [sons] got to see them as people!”

This comment, like many others, is painfully resonant of the need for the most basic human relationships.

Breaking bread together was key. Sitting down and sharing a meal with people of different races and life experience created “an opportunity to have difficult conversations aimed at change.” For many—too many—community members and police it was the first time they had ever sat and talked to each other, citizen to officer, officer to citizen, human being to human being.

Chief Ramsay answered questions about police procedures and holding officers accountable for their actions. He expressed his commitment to change from “reactive policing” to community policing, for the police and community to know each other.

¹ The Washington Post, Tuesday July 19, 2016, A18.

One community member said “It felt like coming into the future. In such a short amount of time there was so much restoration. Everyone walked away with hope.”

A first step. A glimmer of hope. A glimpse of God’s future, for which we pray: *Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.*

Central to the vision is the coming together, breaking bread and beginning to know the Other, who may have different color skin, who has different memories and life experiences. But who has similar hopes and values. Who deserves equal justice, equal respect, in school, at work, on the streets. No one, anywhere, should go hungry for bread, safety, purpose, respect.

Respect, welcome of neighbors and strangers, breaking bread together, knowing one another, building and sustaining relationships—all these are present in our readings from Genesis, and the Gospel this morning.

Using images from his own time Jesus talks with his friends about prayer. In his brief parable it is bread the neighbor asks for, to share with a friend who has arrived unexpectedly in the middle of the night. He’s willing to go out and make a ruckus in the neighborhood in order to be a good host. Yet even in 1st century Palestine, the picture of a man shouting outside a friend’s house at midnight for the loan of three loaves of bread was comical. So also the idea of giving a child a snake instead of a fish, a scorpion instead of an egg. Ridiculous. Who would do such a thing?

The notion of God’s giving something harmful instead of life-giving, or of anyone having to bother God in prayer, as if God might be asleep and unwilling to listen is meant to be ridiculous. *Why would we even think such a thing—that we have to work so hard, make such a fuss to get God’s attention?* Jesus seems to suggest. More realistic is an opposite image: *God leaning in, ear to the door of the house, listening expectantly night and day for us to knock, search, ask.*

In Genesis, we listen in on a pivotal conversation between God and Abraham. Hospitality, welcome of the stranger, is key in the story. It began last Sunday with Abraham sitting at the door of his tent in the heat of the day, he sees three strangers standing near. He runs out to welcome them. Hurries to have cakes of bread made, runs to the field for a calf to be cooked.

A priest friend says that Abrahams hospitality “creates community” here, “creates a holding space . . . allows for mystery and opens the way for a miracle.”² At some point in the visit, Abraham realizes that one of the three is the Lord himself. Perhaps it’s the moment when the Lord promises that, finally, Sarah *will* have a son.

Now, as the three visitors set out toward Sodom, Abraham walks with them, to see them on their way.

² The Rev. John Beddingfield, blog “Words, Nevertheless,” 7/17/16.

A critical moment is missing from our assigned reading. Just before what we heard, the Lord asks, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do . . .? No, for I have chosen him that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice . . .” (18:17, 19).

As the Lord continues, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!” Abraham, listens carefully, realizes what is afoot. As the angels go on to investigate what’s happening in Sodom, Abraham and God stand together and talk.

Now, the people of Sodom are not Abraham’s kin or tribe; but they are his neighbors. Shocked that the Lord intends to destroy them all, he pleads for Sodom: “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?”

Scholar Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls this “one of the most audacious prayers in the Bible.”³ Audacious, yes, *and* a response the Lord seems to invite. Otherwise, why take Abraham into his confidence? God wants Abraham to be in real, trusting relationship with him. To ask for justice and mercy not only for himself and his kin but for those not like him, and, in asking, to discover that this is God’s purpose, too.

Justice and compassion—so often in conflict—are held together in mystery, in the heart of God, and of Abraham. The Judge of all the earth *will do* what is just: for the sake of only 10 righteous, if they be found in the city, the Lord will not destroy it. In his covenant partner Abraham, “*all* the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”

But why is Sodom about to be swept away? Put briefly, the trouble there is not about sexuality, as often, mistakenly, said; but a world view and way of living that are totally contrary to God’s desire for *all* the families and peoples of the earth.

This is what God’s messengers encounter there:

- Hostility toward the stranger, rather than hospitality.
- Un-welcome for the resident alien.
- Threats and violence, a mob mentality, instead of relationship and community.
- Injury instead of pardon.
- Havoc instead of peace.
- Hate instead of love.

It really is as bad as God has heard. Even so, the Lord is on the side of life, not death, and would spare the whole city, including the violent mob, for the sake of only 10 righteous. In the end, only four—all resident aliens—are rescued by the two angels. Sodom is destroyed.

³ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence, (Schocken Books, New York, NY, 2015), 203.

“Do not bring us to the time of trial,” Jesus teaches us to pray. Sometimes we seem to make the time of trial for ourselves. Sometimes it just comes to us. Either way, with the violence and rhetoric of hate in our society and too many places around the world, we are in a time of trial. But we are not without a way forward, though the way is hard.

There is more good news from last week: There was a packed Town Hall meeting in Silver Spring Tuesday night, about police-community relations. County leaders and residents heard the anger, discontent and negative experiences that some community members have had with some MCPD officers, teachers and neighbors, who have a racial or ethnic background different than their own. Many of the stories were hard to hear. But the sharing and the listening were a first step toward real community, understanding and mutual respect.

Following the meeting there is a proposal in the works for a program of inter-racial dialogues in our county.

We are so in need of having difficult conversations about our different memories and experiences. To sit down together and come to know the Other, and ourselves, more deeply and clearly, to become neighbors instead of strangers. To listen to another’s truths with an open heart is a profound act of hospitality, and can be hard to do. But we need to change, and to be changed by each other.

“How much more,” says Jesus, “will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”