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CMCL -- sermons from July 24, 2022

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Sun, Jul 24, 2022 at 8:21 PM

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**Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster****CMCL Sermon: July 24, 2022**

Susan Gascho-Cooke

Arguing with God: Mercy before Pride

[Genesis 18:20-32](#), [Luke 11:1-13](#)

Well, we've got one hour to get this service done before the heat advisory sets in ... so here we go! What better story to tell on a day like today, when we and half the planet seem to be sweltering from record-high temps than one in which a group of people are in danger of perishing of heat-related injuries?

It's almost like you can feel the impending onslaught of hellfire and brimstone ... really adds to the story-telling, eh? While I'm not a fan of hellfire and brimstone ... or heat advisories, I am a fan of Abraham in this story.

The larger story of Sodom and Gomorrah, though, is really awful. While it won't be the focus of this morning, I don't want to lose the chance to say this: Although these stories of Sodom and Gomorrah have been used as clobber texts to bolster and justify "Christian" homophobia, and to harm and vilify gay and lesbian love, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was NOT homosexuality.

The actions of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah in the chapter that follows today's story have NOTHING to do with attraction or love; or consensual commitment. What they try to do is violent assault. God was **not** calling down judgment on queer love here. So when I refer to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, that's NOT what I'm talking about, either. Because of how this

story has been used, it doesn't "just go without saying," though, so I'm saying it.

The Bible itself, in Ezekiel 16:49, even submits a theory about Sodom: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy."

That said, Sodom and Gomorrah were not shining lights on a hill, for all the world to see and admire. The two angels who had visited Abraham in the scripture Leslie preached on last Sunday, went to Sodom and Gomorrah after they visited Abraham.

Unlike the hospitality that Abraham showed them, in Sodom and Gomorrah, the men of the cities intended to assault them. Lot, Abraham's nephew, tried to protect the angel/strangers from that, by offering his daughters instead. So, Lot is not a paragon of righteousness here, either. The point of this story, and Abraham's attempt to persuade God to different action, isn't based on a defense of Lot or Sodom and Gomorrah as deserving of protection based on good behavior.

But the part of the story we're looking at today is Abraham's conversation with God. The Gospel passage paired with this story in the lectionary is the section of Luke 11 where Jesus shows the disciples an example of a prayer (what we usually call "The Lord's Prayer") and two short teachings about prayer. In the first, someone gets what they need by bugging someone so unrelentingly that they give them what they want out of fatigue and exasperation. Then Jesus follows that up with the admonition to: "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."

If prayer is the thread between this passage and this story of Abraham you could say (and it has been said by others) that this is an example of intercessory prayer: he is praying, in that he is communicating with the divine, and he is trying to intercede on behalf of his nephew, Lot, and two whole cities.

And Abraham is exemplifying that persistent, whittle-down type of prayer from Luke 11. But I'm struck by the line in the prayer that Jesus taught: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Because Abraham seems to think God's will is the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and he's not at all trying to align his will with the will of heaven on this. He's trying to change the will of heaven to align with his own will and desire.

This is such an interesting move.

My observation of progressive Christians is that when we feel that the God of scripture appears to be coming out on a different end of an ethical, social

or theological issue than we are, we want to distance ourselves from it, so that it doesn't somehow reflect on us as believers in God.

We can get stuck in that place. When we disagree with God, we doubt our belief in God far more often than we try to argue with God. We feel all the feels about what "Christian" has come to mean— and protest #notallchristians. But just being embarrassed by many streams of Christianity or by Christians who live and believe differently from you doesn't make you not a Christian; and honestly, many of our protests about Christianity. seem to have more to do with trying to pass as non-"that kind of" Christian, rather than actually not *being* Christian.

If you believe that the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are to be taken seriously,

(to love God, love neighbor, love enemy, love self —
to free captives, feed hungry ones —
to be open to seeing anew;
dying to what is killing you,
and trusting that new life can come
from that which we thought was our end)

and if you believe in a God who is present in, and longs to be seen and found in the midst of creation, in the breaking of bread, in the making and sharing of resources, and the making and sharing of beauty, in the stubborn, Sisyphean work of building beloved community (a "kingdom on earth as in heaven) then perhaps you simply ARE a Christian, and need to come to terms with that, comparisons aside.

Abraham's response to a God who seems to be acting unjustly wasn't to not believe anymore, or to withhold belief; or begin a process of exploring his belief indefinitely. No, Abraham fought with God, calling on the justice and mercy he believed God to stand for. The cost of walking away from that conversation with God was too high for Abraham. Because the cost wasn't his faith. The cost was the lives of others. That's what was at stake; so Abraham argued with God.

He didn't decide how to act based on how he felt about God in that moment. He wanted his fellow humans to survive, even if they didn't deserve it.

Even though he used careful language, Abraham didn't seem to hesitate to interact with God in this way and God didn't seem to be at all offended or threatened by Abraham's pushing.

One of the most fabulous stories of Jesus in the Gospels, is the one where he changes his mind. A Canaanite woman came to Jesus, asking for help for her daughter, and he said, "one doesn't take a child's food and give it to the dogs." Definitely not the fabulous bit. But she replied, "even dogs get crumbs

under the table." And he changed his mind and healed her daughter. That's the fabulous bit, in my opinion.

The New York Times this week, invited eight of their Times Opinion columnists "revisit incorrect predictions and bad advice on their parts and reflect on why they changed their minds." Each piece was titled, "[I was wrong about _____](#)" and the list included things like:

"I was wrong about inflation," by Paul Krugman

"I was wrong about capitalism," by David Brooks

"I was wrong about the power of protest," by Zeynep Tufekci

"I was wrong about Trump voters," by Bret Stephens

I realize that a prediction isn't the same as a belief. But I was struck by how significant it felt to read down through a list of titles that began with "I was wrong about ...". It felt radical and provocative. So unusual in our culture. Especially in this time when for a certain set of people in power, there seems to be no capacity or willingness to admit wrongdoing or mistakes. In fact, that being in power means you have immunity from mistakes. And loyalty to that power means not questioning it ever.

This vision of God, as bargained with by Abraham, and in the stories of Jesus, as a God whose mind can be changed, is an exemplification of power that is radically unusual as the gods of our world go.

So, how does it end? Abraham bargains God down to 10. "If there are 10 righteous, I'll spare the city." And God agrees. But then the angels visit Sodom and Gomorrah, and it seems clear there aren't even 10. And the cities are destroyed.

Much like it feels fitting to consider a story of impending brimstone on a day like today, considering what it means to fight for a humanity that seems much like a lost cause much of the time also feels fitting and familiar. But I want to be like Abraham, always believe in the wider mercy, even if it means arguing with God. I want to put my hopes for the welfare of others above my personal qualms with pride and belief. And I want to celebrate a God whose mind can be changed.

I think who we believe God to be matters. It effects how we interact with human power figures. It effects how strongly we'll be willing to advocate for others. If we believe we can negotiate with God, we will hopefully have the audacity to negotiate with the powers-that-be here on earth, too. And if we expect a God of mercy, justice and love, perhaps we won't allow for human leaders who don't exemplify those things.

Thank you for being my community of this kind of faith.

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