

Mercy That Goes Beyond Belief

Text: Genesis 18:22-33

**A Message by
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There are certain passages of scripture and message themes to which I periodically return. One of my favorite passages in Hebrew scripture is found in Genesis Chapter 18. Here we have this wonderful dialogue between Abraham and God. As I tell my friends who believe in the immutability or unchangeability of God, turn to Genesis 18. Abraham and God are discussing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, probably history's best-known wide-open cities. Moreover, as the story has it, it became so bad that God determined to do something about the cities. God's initial decision was that they would be put under a demolition order, without bothering to inform the inhabitants. And wasn't it about time! With the possible exception of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, the rest of the world would see that annihilation as a clear and definite improvement. Moreover, it would show leaders in

other parts of the world just what the righteousness and wrath of God looked like should their cities become evil.

And then, of all people, it is Abraham—probably the most righteous, godly man of his time, who has questions and misgivings about God venting His wrath on this evil in such an indiscriminate way. We have this very strange encounter where a moral man sets out to trouble the conscience of God.

God is proceeding along with intentions to blow up the cities, and what does Abraham say? “God, I don’t mean to be brash, but what if there are fifty good people in those cities? Would letting those fifty be destroyed fit with your reputation for justice and mercy? Are you willing to punish the good with the evil? And God finally says, “O.K. If there are fifty good persons in the cities I will not destroy them.”

But as God turns to leave, Abraham says, “Just a minute, please. Suppose when you count up the righteous you are five short of the fifty? Are you going to go ahead and incinerate

the forty-five for a little shortage like that?” And God says, “If in fact there are forty-five, the towns will survive.”

Abraham, however, is still not through. “Lord,” he says, “I don’t mean to be a pest, but this really does bother me. Would you really let forty good persons, ones who have remained good in the midst of all that evil, be swept away with the evil ones?” And the Lord says, “All right, then, forty it is.”

Well, though on very thin ice, Abraham continues, “O Lord, please try not to get mad, but I just have to ask. Will you really do it if there are thirty?” And perhaps with a growing edge to the divine voice, God says, “All right, all right. But bear in mind that that is only fifteen in each of them. Still, if they are there, I won’t do it.”

And Abraham, perhaps checking his pulse to be sure that his heart is still being allowed to beat, asks: “How about twenty, Lord?” And a tight-lipped deity agrees to twenty.

Only once more does Abraham risk it. He asks that the cities be spared for ten righteous persons. That little in number

could be slipped out of town without alerting the rest. The Lord, it says, agreed to ten. Abraham pushes no further.

Well, if you know the story, there weren't even ten. But the outcome is not really the meat of the story. *What is amazing and revealing is that odd dialogue with God, which was really Abraham's struggle with himself and his own religious certainty.*

Abraham was questioning his own fierce sense of what God's Will must be. He was concerned and worried about his own passionate belief in divine vengeance and justice. In a way that most human beings seldom respond, Abraham was feeling uncomfortable about his own moral outrage, and the way it found him relishing this approaching destruction. You might say he had caught himself feeling just too good about what was happening...about those evil cities and those evil people getting what they deserve...about God apparently seeing things just the way that he did. Amazingly, at what would have been the most religiously exhilarating of moments for most of us, Abraham begins probing whether anything, even this, can be

that one-sided, or that he should be feeling that certain about it.

He describes it as bargaining with God, but it is Abraham's own belief and theology and moral passion that is under questioning. "As much evil as there is, *what if* there are 50...30...even 10 mixed in?" "If we are attacking a big enough evil, if we are fighting for a large enough right, if we are certain enough that we really have a handle on the will of God, doesn't that make a few injustices, a few lapses of mercy, and occasional crushing of the good, more or less acceptable?" "Aren't there some things or some persons so completely outside of God's mercy and love, that we don't need to restrain our hatred or question our relish over what befalls them?" I don't know...One thing, however, can be said...Human beings throughout history have consistently been in their most dangerous condition, and often at their absolute worst, when they were certain beyond a shadow of any doubt that they knew the will, the mind, the angers, and the preferences of

God. Ironically, it has been from those points of strongest belief, and most passionate conviction, that we had so many of our purges, persecutions, inquisitions, witch hunts, heresy trials, excommunications, holy wars and even Quaker disownments.

Now, it wasn't the strong feelings and convictions, or the deep moral passion that was wrong. What *was* wrong was the feeling that *they* or *we* had been granted an unrestricted moral "hunting license." What was wrong was the feeling that it did not have to be questioned, doubted, examined, conditioned by mercy, because it "smacked of God" and of "good" and "morality" and "conviction" and "principle" and "righteousness." And that, dear friends, is a dangerous and an awesome point at which to be.

Being on the side of "right" is quite an experience. The evil is cornered, the villain is caught red-handed, and our "righteous indignation" is about to find some satisfaction. We and God are about to prevail. It is for the "faith" or for the "country"

or for our “children and youth,” and for “honesty and truth,” and so knowing that, do we still have to question, second-guess our motives, worry about exceptions? As unnatural as it feels at the time, *we really do need to*.

To be more explicit, if the possibility that there are 40 or 30 or 10 exceptions in Sodom and Gomorrah does not at least occur to us, and somewhat condition our fervor, then *we* have got a problem. If we are able to hear the numbers of dead and wounded in Ukraine or Gaza on the evening News, and somehow shut out the picture of babies and elementary age school children, and the fact that the soldier killed or wounded is not someone’s beloved son or daughter, then the element of mercy in our morality has somehow been drowned out. If we are able to scream with joy, “Mass Deportation Now,” and somehow not imagine the separation of parents from children or children from parents, and put these persons in a place called “Alligator Alcatraz,” and not be reminded of the

Concentration Camps during World War II, then something is wrong with our morality and ethics.

You see, *when we get to the point that human suffering in whatever form, no longer stirs any sense of human tragedy and loss because we feel so safely and completely on the side of right, then, dear friends, we are no longer safely on the side of right.* In the words of Hannah Arendt, "The first sign of a civilization in decline is the loss of human empathy."

Of all the greatness that the Bible ascribes to the man Abraham, it says nothing that speaks more highly than this: *his mercy and caring went even beyond his belief and understanding of God.* It doesn't always change the outcome of things—it didn't that time. But this quality of mercy made all of the difference in the world in who he was, and it makes all of the difference in the world in who we are as children of the Living God.