

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 24, 2022

GENESIS 18:20-32 | PSALM 138 | COLOSSIANS 2:6-15 | LUKE 11:1-13

When he was running Boston's Democratic machine in the late nineteenth century, Martin Lomasney offered his candidates some sage advice. "Never write if you can speak; never speak if you can nod; never nod if you can wink." Lomasney's advice was strategic, not aspirational. Don't make commitments. Don't leave a trail. Don't get involved. Don't start conversations. We might take his advice to its logical conclusion, "Never wink if you can do nothing at all."

Even if we're not campaigning to run a post office in the West End, you can imagine importing that strategy into your own life. Life is mostly about avoiding mistakes. If you try to make your community a better place, people might criticize your ideas. If you try to comfort someone experiencing a loss, you might say the wrong thing. If you ask a question, you might get an answer you don't like. So just take Lomasney's advice. Don't leave a trail. Don't make commitments. Don't get involved. And never ever start a conversation.

But today's first reading and gospel offer a different vision of God's commitments to us and our commitments to each other. Let's begin with Genesis. Last week, you may remember that we heard the story of the three visitors to Abraham and Sarah in the desert. Abraham welcomes the visitors and makes them this lavish meal. Abraham shows them hospitality, and the visitors promise that Sarah will have a son. And after the visitors finish eating, they keep walking until they get to the city of Sodom. And when these visitors arrive in Sodom, they are shown no hospitality. No meal. No water. No shade. When the authors of Genesis want to show you how evil the city of Sodom is, that's the image. Sodom is on track to be destroyed because it can't welcome strangers.

And here's where the story gets interesting, less because of what happens to Sodom than how Abraham and God both discover their true identities. The story of Abraham and God in Genesis takes place over the course of seven visits, sometimes we call these "theophanies." This is theophany number six. Abraham has talked to God before, but this is the first time that, instead of just responding to God, Abraham initiates a conversation. Abraham starts something. And he doesn't exactly take Lomasney's advice. "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" So much for winking. Abraham discovers that he is not simply a passive recipient of God's blessings, but that he has been empowered to articulate and advocate for the world God has promised.

And how does God change or develop in this story? Well, up to this point YHWH has been mostly a local god. A deity who is mostly concerned with some small set of people. And here the scope starts to expand a little bit. You notice the phrase that gets repeated in this story is 'abur, meaning "for the sake of." God's actions are no longer just about one particular group of people, but they've expanded to include a broader swath of people, including people like the xenophobic residents of Sodom. God acts for the sake of others. God gets involved. God intercedes.

This kind of conversation with God, negotiating bleeding into argument, may strike us as a bit harsh, but we do this in worship every week. And we do that through our practice

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of intercessory prayer. One of the defining features of intercessory prayer is that it is prayer that is not primarily about us. It isn't just *Here's a list of the stuff I would like to change about my life*. But it's prayer for other faith communities, the creation, all the people of the world, and those in distress. It includes our local concerns, but it isn't limited by them. We pray for God to act for the sake of others. That includes people we don't know, people with different interests than us, and people we don't like.

You can even imagine this in the terms from today's reading. When we engage in intercessory prayer, we put ourselves between God and creation and say, "Surely this isn't beyond God's concern or action or vision." That even this situation that looks irredeemable, a situation where we might see little of much worth, can be redeemed and made whole by God. Like Abraham, when we engage in that intercession, we hold two seemingly competing ideas together. One is that God is gracious and merciful and acts for others. And the other is that we need God's continued action to redeem and reconcile our world. We praise and we beseech at the same time. And sometimes even if we don't have a clear agenda, even if we don't have a clear way forward or even know quite what we want, it's enough to just hold those two things together. We hold God and our world in a common space.

And the reason we pray this way is because Jesus intercedes for us. Jesus gets himself involved. In today's gospel reading, Jesus teaches us the prayer he uses. What's remarkable about this prayer is the way it presumes that God can be addressed intimately. No big wind-up to try to convince God to listen. Just *pater*, which we translate as "Father." In the same way that Abraham discovers that he can initiate a conversation with God, not simply respond when God deigns to speak to him, Jesus assumes that God is near and doesn't need to be cajoled or convinced to listen. Jesus prays respectfully and deliberately but unapologetically.

And Jesus's prayer is a prayer not just for him, but that God's kingdom, God's ways of being, would come into all the earth. That it would come to Jews and Samaritans. Greeks and Romans. Pharisees and tax collectors. Young and old. Rich and poor. That everyone would inhabit God's ways of being. Jesus prays for the kingdom of God to come about among us. Jesus doesn't need the kingdom of God. He is the kingdom of God. But we do. And so Jesus prays for, intercedes for, all of us.

And, here's the best part. Jesus tells us that we should pray this way, too. You could imagine that Jesus would say, *This is the way I pray because I'm the son of God. And here's the "Prayer for Dummies" version that you can use.* But Jesus says, *You pray the way I do. You can take on my words. You can step into my place. You can inhabit my relationship with God and pray for God's kingdom to come into the world.* Jesus intercedes for us so that we can intercede for others. And because Jesus has been raised from death, there is no point of creation, of time, of geography that hasn't been given new life. So even when all we can do is hold those things together, we're never doing so in vain.

In Christ, our world is held together in a single peace. And in our prayer and action it is as well.

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