

August 18, 2019
10th Sunday after Pentecost
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Pray Like Abraham

Genesis 18:20–32 (NIV84)

Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.” ²² The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” ²⁶ The LORD said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” ²⁷ Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?” “If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.” ²⁹ Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?” He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.” ³⁰ Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?” He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.” ³¹ Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.” ³² Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

Have you ever been a participant in a negotiation between a parent and a young child, as the parent or the child? The child has just received a bag full of candy and wants to eat 20 pieces. The parent only wants them to have one. The child begs for just 10 pieces and the parent says “one.” The child asks politely for five pieces and the parent says, “one.” The child says please and promises to clean their room if they can just have three pieces. The parent says “one.” Finally the child begs and little tears roll out of their eyes as they ask pitifully for just two pieces and the parent says, “one.” Or the parent gives in at this point impressed with the negotiating skills of their child.

This is usually how it goes when you negotiate with someone who has all the power. They get to decide what you will get. The negotiation may start at a level you are pleased with but the deal gets more and more in their favor before the agreement is reached. It never happens that you are able to go the other way and get more and more from that powerful person that you asked for to begin. Unless you are Abraham negotiating with the Lord in our account today. Abraham receives a much better deal (promise) from the Lord than he began with.

The Lord Abraham prayed to close to 4000 years ago is the same yesterday, today and forever. The Lord has not changed. And we are children of Abraham through faith in Christ. Therefore we too can pray like

Abraham – Boldly to the Lord and at the same time humbly before the Lord.

Boldly to the Lord

Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.” ²² The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

God had decided to reveal his plan to Abraham, whom he had chosen to carry on the promised line of the Savior. The Lord would go down to see Sodom and Gomorrah. Of course, the Lord knows exactly what has been happening there but a personal visit will leave no doubt to anyone that the Lord did what was right when he destroys the cities. He knew and he saw their wickedness. Theirs was not ordinary sin. These cities took sin to a new level of wickedness. Part of their wickedness is told in the next chapter of Genesis. Abraham’s nephew Lot seeks to appease the lust of the men of Sodom by sending out his daughters to them instead the two men (really angels) who had come from the Lord. We are horrified at Lot’s offer. The men of Sodom were angry with Lot for daring to tell them that they were doing something wrong in their lust for men. So they tried to break down Lot’s door. The people of Sodom rejected God’s natural law written in their hearts and violently attacked anyone who told them they were sinning. The Lord will find that what they have done is as bad, or worse, than the outcry that has reached him.

Abraham knows the reputation of Sodom. He also knows that his nephew Lot and his family are living in that wicked city that will surely be destroyed by the Lord. Abraham knows the Lord is correct to destroy these rebellious people in these wicked cities. He knows that he is nothing before the Lord. Yet he prays boldly to the Lord.

Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

Abraham approached the Lord. Don’t miss that statement. Abraham approached the Lord. How can Abraham, a sinner, stand before the Holy Lord God? How can he approach the sinless God as a sinner? Centuries later, Esther would be chosen as the new queen for the king of Persia. She was one of many wives he had. There was a plot to kill all the Jews and Esther had to approach the king, her husband, to try and save her people. But the king held such power that a person could be executed for approaching the king without an invitation, even his wife. Read the short book of Esther to see how it goes.

If an earthly king can execute someone for approaching without an invitation, the Judge of all the Earth is even more dangerous to approach. The Lord knows every sin. The Lord knows every thought of my heart. How can I dare approach him to ask anything of him? He will see my sin and destroy me or send me away or simply ignore me. But Abraham can approach the Lord because Abraham is a righteous man. These words are recorded just a few chapters before this account: “Abram believed the Lord and

he credited it to him as righteousness.” Abraham was credited as righteous by faith in God’s promises, especially the promise that one of his descendants would be the Savior of the world. Abraham can only approach the Holy God because his sins have been forgiven and he is clothed in Christ’s righteousness by faith.

So we can also be bold enough to approach the Almighty and Holy God because Christ has covered our sins and clothed us in a robe of his perfect righteousness. When you go to the Lord in prayer, you go in the name of Jesus, as a beloved child of your Father in heaven. Therefore, you can be sure that your Father in heaven hears your prayer. Just as surely as the Father listens to Jesus, his only Son, he listens to all who come to him through faith in Jesus. We too can pray boldly as Abraham prays.

What a bold prayer it is! Abraham asks God to spare the cities for the sake of 50 righteous people. He eventually gets God down to 10 righteous people. Remember a righteous person is one with faith in the Lord. Abraham calls on God to be true to his nature. “*Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” Of course, the Lord will do what is right. He does not make mistakes. He does not do what is evil. He always does what is right. Abraham suggests that saving the cities for the sake of 10 righteous people is what is right. But he calls on the Lord to be true to his nature.

We too can call on God to be who he is. God is love. When you make a request to the God who is love, know that he loves you beyond what we can imagine. He wants what is best for you. Jesus gave up his life for your eternal good because of his great love. Pray boldly to the God who is love.

The Lord is merciful and compassionate. When we pray to the Lord for forgiveness, he forgives. He delights in showing mercy and compassion. We cast our anxieties on him because he cares for us.

God is all powerful. Pray boldly to the all powerful God. He can do more than we ask or imagine. He can heal and help and even change hearts from unbelief to faith. Bring bold prayers to the God for whom nothing is impossible.

Humbly before the Lord

Certainly, Abraham’s prayer was bold but notice how he is humble at the same time.

Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes,²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?” “If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.”²⁹ Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?” He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.”³⁰ Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?” He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”³¹ Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”³² Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

Abraham calls himself “nothing but dust and ashes.” He twice asks the Lord not to be angry with him. Abraham knows that the Lord does not have to listen to him. The Lord does not have to agree to his terms. The Lord is almighty and holy and Abraham is a sinner whose body will one day return to the

dust.

As we pray to our Lord, we also pray with humility. Yes, the Lord has forgiven all our sins through Christ. Yes, we are his children through faith in Christ. Yes, he loves us. But God is still God and we are still flesh and sinful flesh at that. God has no weaknesses. We are weak in body, mind and spirit. So we will approach him humbly with repentant hearts.

We also approach our God humbly with the attitude Jesus teaches in the Lord's prayer when we say, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus himself models this attitude in Gethsemane when he says, "'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done'" (Luke 22:42).

How did this prayer work for Jesus? He drank the cup of suffering, died a horrible death by crucifixion and was buried in a tomb. But God's will was done and the sins of the world were paid by Christ. Death was overcome when Christ rose and all who trust in Christ will live forever with God. God's will is good!

How did Abraham's bold and humble prayer work out? Even with Lot and his family, the Lord did not find ten believers in Sodom. The Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, the angels dragged Lot, along with his wife and daughters outside of the city to spare them. That was not part of Abraham's prayer, but the Lord is gracious and compassionate. God's will is good!

How do your prayers to the Lord work out? Sometime we don't know. Sometimes it looks like the fire and brimstone of Sodom's destruction is raining down in our lives. Even in those times, we can trust that the Lord will work out things according to his good and gracious will. So pray boldly to the Lord but humbly accept that the Lord will answer according to his will. This is how Abraham prayed. It is how Jesus prayed. Pray to our Father in heaven like Abraham and like Jesus.

Amen.