

Scripture and Sermon June 14, 2015

Genesis 18:16-32

Then the men set out from there, and they looked towards Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The LORD said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 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; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.' Then the LORD said, 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.'

So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham came near and said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 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?' And the LORD said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Abraham answered, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?' And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' Again he spoke to him, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' He said, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.'

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Mark 4:26-34

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Here ends today's readings from our Holy Scripture. May God bless this, our understanding of God's Holy Word. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Let us pray...Amen.

Abraham was a genius. Maybe not in the modern sense, but in the way that he understood his faith, and in the way that he understood God's intentions in the world. Abraham, our shared spiritual ancestor with our sisters and brothers of the Muslim faith, convinced God to change God's mind.

In our Old Testament reading this morning, we have the story of how God visited Abraham, and upon leaving, shared the fact that two cities were about to be destroyed because of their sinfulness. It's interesting to note that God debated whether to even share this information with Abraham, but decided that since Abraham had been charged with doing righteousness and justice on behalf of God, he deserved to know the truth.

And as soon as Abraham heard the truth, he began advocating for the righteous in those cities. Without hesitation, he began trying to change God's mind. Methodically, without drama, Abraham conversed with God about how many righteous people should die in order that the wicked be punished. Here's the genius of Abraham: he somehow knew that God's loving mercy was infinitely more powerful than God's need to punish.

Abraham wasn't afraid to engage God on this issue: he was doing what God wanted him to do, extending God's mercy to others. And that's what we are called to do as well: extend God's mercy to others. It's what the Rahma Clinic does so well: extend God's mercy to others.

We don't have to be Abraham to act on our faith. We don't have to be Abraham to extend God's mercy to those most in need. We just need to understand what Abraham understood, that God's mercy is so much more important than God's judgment. And as an aside, it's not really our job to act as God's judges, is it? The call we receive as God's children is one that commands that we love our neighbor as ourselves; nowhere are we called to judge others on their behavior or their circumstances.

It's become commonplace for society to judge those who receive assistance from our government. This impulse has led some state governments to pass laws about what kinds of foods recipients may purchase, and what kinds of drug tests they must pass in

order to continue receiving benefits. I did a little research for New York State that you might find interesting: the average household receiving help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) receives \$3060.00 in benefits, or about \$255.00 per month in food assistance.

The average homeowner in New York State receives a tax benefit of \$2,950.00. So while recipients who receive food assistance are generally thought of one way, homeowners in New York State are never thought of as receiving government assistance, and I have yet to see anyone suggest that in order to receive tax deductions for their home ownership, home owners must spend their money on only certain items, and should submit to drug testing before they can receive their tax refund.

Homeowners and SNAP recipients in the state of New York receive about the same amount of benefits from the government, but most of us think of these groups as being radically different. Why is that?

What most impresses me about the Rahma Clinic, is that they extend God's mercy to all, with no exceptions. No judgment. Just care. Just dignity. Just love. They are acting like Abraham did, advocating for righteousness and justice, and I am so happy that our Faith Formation program has found a way to assist the Rahma Clinic in their efforts. And we are honored to be able to assist them in their mission of mercy.

We all could benefit from taking a page out of Abraham's book; finding ways to advocate for those in need of mercy and justice is, in fact, our shared and common cause. Acting on our faith, whether the Muslim faith or the Christian faith, leads to the same outcome: justice and mercy for those who are most in need. And the impulse to do so comes from the same loving and merciful God. It is simply the right thing to do, whether we worship every week, once a year, or rarely ever.

Acting on our faith means sharing God's loving mercy with all who are in need. There's no one way, there are as many ways to advocate justice and mercy for those in need as there are God's children. But in our common efforts to combat poverty, and to combat the continuing lack of medical insurance coverage that plagues many of our neighbors, we are like Abraham: extending God's mercy in the face of disaster.

We are each called by God to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are each called by God to act on our faith on behalf of those who have no voice, little resources, but much need. The good news for today is that in its own, quiet and humble way, the Rahma Clinic is faithfully fulfilling that call, and that in a small way, we are partners in extending God's mercy and healing love to some of the neediest members of our community.

Abraham was a genius. Perhaps it was God's wisdom inside him that caused him to speak up for the righteous few living in the cities that were condemned as sinful. Perhaps it was his own unique soul that resonated with the plight of the voiceless. But either way, he offers us an example of faith action in our own modern time filled with neighbors in need.

I would like to ask each of you to find some time this week to reflect on Abraham, and his actions on behalf of the righteous. In his efforts to give them voice, he convinced God to spare the cities in which they lived. He convinced God to act on God's merciful impulse. He used the resources at his disposal to extend God's mercy to those most in need.

And so should we. And so we do. With faith, sometimes like a mustard seed, tiny at first, but ready to burst forth as a seedling, then a plant, we are at our best when we are acting on our faith. Abraham knew it was God's prerogative to judge those who had sinned. But he did not take that role on himself. He merely acted on behalf of the righteous few who live among them.

Judging those who receive assistance is not our job. There is no stigma for those of us who receive significant tax benefits because of our home ownership, or because of the way we earn our income. Neither should there be a stigma associated with needing food, or shelter, or health care.

Today, two faith traditions have come together to answer our respective calls from God: to serve those less fortunate. I thank the faithful members of the Rahma Clinic for showing us their way of answering that call, and for allowing us to help.

In our shared admiration and love of Abraham, we find a common spiritual ancestor. May his genius, his courage, and his faithfulness inspire the faith communities that emanated from his family, and may those things transcend faith labels.

Blessings on the care and on the healing that the Rahma Clinic extends to our neighbors in the greater Syracuse area. May your ministrations and your efforts continue to reach the neediest of our neighbors, a beacon of mercy in a world desperate for care. Amen.