

Better Bargain Blessing

Genesis 18: 20-33 Luke 11: 1-13

I'm sure that you've noticed how much people – most everyone I know – takes great pride in getting a deal. We like a good deal. One president called his array of social programs the “New Deal.” One of our presidential candidates gained fame for a best-selling autobiography titled “The Art of the Deal.” Yes, everyone wants a good deal, not a raw deal.

I particularly appreciate folks who are willing to shop car dealers and spend an unreasonable amount of time haggling their way through the ridiculous process scripted by most showrooms. Frankly, it isn't a deal worth having as far as I'm concerned. But there are folks – sick ones in my opinion – whose adrenalin flows when presented with this challenge to make the system work for them.

My late father-in-law was like that, the consummate deal maker, a salesman by profession. He loved to tell the stories of matching wits with his adversary, pushing hard, pulling back, feinting, parrying, posturing, all like an elaborate chess match conducted in a peculiar ritual dance. He could play this game with them for days.

Me, I want to buy a car at a fair price. Tell me what you've got and if it works for me, it's a deal. The whole game seems like a stupid waste of my time and I won't go anywhere near dealers like that.

I have a colleague who used to brag about the great deals he would get from a car dealer when he dropped the name of one of the dealerships' owners. The individual with the magical name was a mutual acquaintance, so I thought I'd try it. It really didn't seem to matter. I asked Mr. Magic if I was missing something. Do I get a special deal for dropping his name? Does he need to call them on my behalf? He said, “No, they're going to give you whatever deal they're going to give you regardless of whether you use my name or not.” I never had the heart to tell my colleague that his impression of getting some awesome deal was totally wrong, even though he marveled that I never followed his tactic. I don't think he would have believed me anyway. My failure was particularly curious to him since Mr. Magic was a member of **my** congregation, not his.

When we think about God's blessings, we're explicitly told by pastors (like me) that you can't bargain with God. God is not in the habit of playing ‘let's make a deal.’ A favorite tactic we all have – yes, you know you've done it; don't lie – is to play dealmaker with God. Like this: ‘Lord, if you help me out on this one, I promise I will do something awesome for you.’ God doesn't do *quid pro quo* – the Latin phrase that literally means “this-for-that.” God is not some glorified vacuum cleaner salesman.

But here's the problem. It's our scripture reading in Genesis 18. Good heavens, God is playing ‘let's make a deal’ with Abraham. Whaaat?

This passage directly follows last week's passage about the three mysterious visitors. In the conversation about the promised son being fulfilled, suddenly the dialog shows that one of the speakers is "the Lord" – Yahweh or God. In 18:9-10, the dialog changes from "Where is your wife, Sarah," **they** asked him.(vs. 9) to (vs. 10) **Then the Lord [Yahweh] said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, will have a son."** That's all we get.

These were more than messengers *from* Yahweh. God – Yahweh – appeared apparently in some human figure with the other two. In our passage today, vs. 22 says: **The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before Yahweh.** There it is again; God and Abraham are face-to-face.

Changes like this – sudden, inexplicable, and particularly inconsistent changes within the single story unit – strongly suggest that an editorial hand has altered the text to suit a particular purpose. The reason in the passage from last week seems easy enough; the fulfillment oracle for the promise of a son made by the Lord should be provided by Yahweh directly, not some lackey. It's that important.

In our passage today, we need to understand why the editor saw this story as so important that God must address Abraham directly and in person.

Let's note how this section talks *about* Sodom and Gomorrah, and yet is at odds with *what happens* to Sodom and Gomorrah in the next chapter. The two pieces don't agree. Again, we likely have a separate tradition that the editor has added to reflect Yahweh in a very important way.

(By the way: when the text says "the Lord" here in Genesis, in no way do these Hebrew authors suggest that it was Jesus. If they didn't say this is Jesus, it's unhelpful for us to do so. Besides, it makes a mockery of the gospels' incarnation and birth narratives if Jesus was already walking around a thousand years before. Think about it; it doesn't work.)

Abraham begins what becomes a series of challenges to "the Lord."

Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? That's the primary question. This basic issue would define the justice of God. Is God truly just or not?

To wipe out the righteous and unrighteous alike simply because the unrighteous are greater in number would be a failure of justice. Would God make the righteous pay for the sins of the unrighteous? Or would God make the unrighteous responsible for the deaths of the righteous? Justice is simply not achieved, and God's actions would be unjust no matter what.

What follows is Abraham naming a number of righteous among the unrighteous, and asking if Yahweh will destroy the whole city if such-and-such number of righteous individuals is within it. It's like a reverse auction. Each time, Yahweh answers "no." Each time, Yahweh makes it clear that the righteous and the unrighteous together will be

saved, because of the righteous, and despite the dire sinfulness of the city. Each time, Yahweh persists in sparing all, even if there is only a tiny number of righteous among the unrighteous.

This understanding of God displays the higher righteousness of Yahweh compared to other gods in known traditions. We will hear later in scripture about issues surrounding the total destruction of nations or cities of the enemies of God's people. You may remember God ordering King Saul to destroy a whole people and everything in that place, but Saul decides to keep some prizes from the conquest. Saul's failure to follow God's destructive orders is the beginning of Saul's falling out with God. Note the common practice of total destruction and how such thorough brutality was regarded throughout the nations as divinely inspired. It simply depended on your god.

The dialog with Abraham shows that Yahweh **is** ready to deal. Yahweh will respond to the challenge of the human, repeatedly. It's a sign of the power of covenant and the mutuality of the promise between Creator and creature.

Unlike other gods who may be encountered among other people, this God is responsive in covenant, and upholds righteousness and justice. I don't know if it really means God is making special deals, but surely this God, Yahweh, is the real deal.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus starts by teaching about prayer, providing us with a version of the Lord's Prayer. (Matthew's version within the Sermon on the Mount is the basis for the Lord's Prayer that we use today.) Luke's is compact but reflects the several petitions within the Lord's Prayer; provision of daily bread, forgiveness of sins, forgiveness of sinners, and led not into temptation.

This is a prayer for the **community**. Nowhere and at no time would we say, 'Give *me my* daily bread; forgive *my* sins as *I* forgive sinners, lead *me* not into temptation.' With the Lord's Prayer, it is always and ever "we" and "us." Therefore, it is not a private tool but a community witness to its sacred priorities.

Then Jesus tells a little story about the inconvenient friend who is first told to buzz off by his sleepy amigo in bed. Yet despite that initial rejection, the story admits that the request will be fulfilled. The reason it gets done is a word that doesn't translate nicely. Our pew Bible translates it as "boldness." The word is odd; *anaideia* which literally means "shamelessness." Applied to the context as the reason for the request to be fulfilled, we find that it is motivated by avoidance of shame. It is not the performance of goodness, not the generosity of friendship, but the compelling priority of shame and the honor code. Still, this is a lousy motivation. Jesus goes on to explain this.

Jesus now talks about ask, seek, and knock. Here Jesus makes the promise related to prayer, that the asker receives, the seeker finds, and one knocking gets an open door.

Is fulfillment a matter of doubt for the one praying? What's the deal here? Then consider this by focusing on a parent/child relationship.

In a series of pairings, Jesus suggests that the father would not substitute something unhelpful for what was sought. Luke uses the images of asking for a fish and getting a serpent, and of asking for an egg and getting a scorpion.

The point is that in the parent/child relationship, experience tells us that the typical parent is going to be as helpful to the child as possible, seeking to fulfill the request as closely as possible, and maybe even exceeding it. The love and caring within that relationship should define the expectations and make the actions of the parent somewhat more predictable.

Finally, Luke retains one more awkward piece in his version of ask-seek-knock. Jesus' concluding words in Matthew say: *If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give **good things** to those who ask him?* Luke's version makes one substitute: *If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give **the Holy Spirit** to those who ask him?* Hey, wait a minute! Those are two different items; good things, which sounds like Christmas presents, and the Holy Spirit which sounds like not-Christmas-presents. What's the deal here?

Hopefully, you're ready to be blessed in whatever way God manages to bless you. While you have the assurance of God's activity within a parent/child relationship for example, it's clearly no guarantee that a prayerful petitioner will receive precisely what was requested. Surprises should be expected. And if surprises are to be expected, we may want to reconsider before complaining that God has not heard our petition, or that God has not opened the door, and we have not found what we were seeking.

Yes, God blesses as God chooses to bless. And God blesses in accord with God's purposes and toward the advancement of the Kingdom. Let's always remember that God may have a better blessing for us than we could imagine. It may be a better bargain blessing that provides what we truly need, and even more.