

God Is Ready to Bless

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

I 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 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 car salesmen for days.

Me, I want to buy a car at a fair price. Tell me what you've got and if it all 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.

Internet auction site eBay popularized the notion of competitive bidding on items for sale. This, too, can be a colossal waste of time since most serious bidding happens in the last few minutes or even seconds that an item is posted. Even at that, if the seller doesn't see a bid price close to what's acceptable, it can be yanked by the seller. Clearly, lots of people seem to get a charge out of playing this game of seeking out the best bargain, even if it seems difficult to justify the time spent and the money saved on all but the most exceptional deal.

In this deal-making scheme, the buyer tries to get the seller to give up a certain amount of the expected sale price. The buyer thinks they've gained something – they've won the contest by getting the seller to yield something from the asking price – but it may be that the seller had inflated the price and was actually willing to accept far less than what was settled upon. The buyer will likely never know, but the seller knows.

People will go through all of this craziness in order to gain a little something. Does this tell us anything about how God grants blessings? Do people gain something by bargaining with God? If so, how does *that* work? Is it like this: 'Lord, if you help me out on this one matter, 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, and Abraham seems to be running the deal. Whaaat?

This passage directly follows the 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.”

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**. 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. 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. 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 defined 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 of 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 or peoples who are enemies of God’s people. The common practice was total destruction and 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 not only makes a covenant with the people, this God is also responsive in covenant, upholding righteousness and justice. I don't know if it means God is making special deals, but surely this God, Yahweh, is the real deal. This God is ready to bless the one who is faithful in seeking the best from God.

This added story of Abraham bargaining with God makes it clear that God is calling the shots, yet God is also responsive to those who seek God's justice.

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 the faith community's 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 the initial rejection of the request, 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? Is it too good to be true? Then consider this in another way by focusing on a parent/child relationship.

In a series of pairings, Jesus suggests that the father would not substitute something unhelpful or harmful 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's gospel 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 sounds like Christmas presents, and the Holy Spirit sounds like not-Christmas-presents. What's the deal here?

We always need to remember that God is not Santa Claus, making God into some infantile wish-fulfillment device. It is astounding how commonly this corrupt notion of God's blessing gets presented. It doesn't come in transparent packaging, but peel off the wrapper and it isn't God from whom they seek a blessing; it's really more appropriate to Santa Claus.

Underlying Jesus' expression about ask, seek, and knock, knowing that God is faithful like a parent to a child, is a **context**. The context is the conversation with his disciples. It isn't some saying that can be pulled out of its context. Within its context, within a conversation with those who have already committed themselves to Jesus and his mission to advance the Kingdom, the ask-seek-knock expression concerns their work in ministry to advance the Kingdom. If we remove it from that context as a stand-alone saying, then it is quickly corrupted into 'ask-seek-knock for whatever you want because Santa Claus, er, God, will do it.'

If the ask-seek-knock is for the advancement of the Kingdom, then watch how God will provide for those who are faithfully committed. Abraham sought justice from God, and God listened and dialogued with his faithful servant. Jesus seeks to transform the world with the Kingdom mission, and assures his disciples that God will listen and, as a father with their child, will do whatever can be done to provide what is needed.

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 provide what we truly need to be faithful in our service to the Kingdom, and even more for what lies ahead. God is ready to bless.