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Genesis 18: 20-32

Why Community?

From time to time, when I'm out and about in the world, I inevitably run into people who I know from St. Mark's. If I haven't seen them lately, they usually look a little sheepish and tell me how they've been meaning to come to church; they just haven't made it in a while. Life has been busy or something or another.

I never quite know what to say when I have these encounters. The good southern girl in me is socialized to accommodate and smooth over the awkwardness. "Of course you wouldn't be coming to church! Weekends are busy...life is hard. I wouldn't go if I were you!" Which isn't really what I want to say. And it's also not true. I like to say that I went to church so much that they started paying me!

In this week when we have lost two of our most stalwart members - Tim Veney and Crane Miller, two people who are so integral to this community it is hard to imagine St. Mark's without them - I've been thinking of what drives the dogged commitment of those who receive no paycheck or time in the pulpit. Those who show up week after week, then weeks turn into years. What kept them coming? What keeps you coming?

It's not the easiest question to answer in these days when it is unlikely for any of us to answer, "I come to church for the salvation of my soul." Salvation is a bit heavy for folks around here. What I do hear is that people come here for the community. Community. It's one of those vague, nice sounding words, until you start thinking of actual communities. It's like when you

say you value authenticity, then someone starts saying things authentically and you realize that's not what you wanted at all. Things can be messier and more difficult in reality than they are in the imagination. Communities can be hurtful; communities can do damage. The KKK is a community, I suppose. Congress is a community. We come for the community, but what about community and why this community?

When I was a freshman in college and writing a paper on some Platonic dialogue, because eighteen year olds are totally equipped for that kind of thing, I remember talking with my advisor about Plato's forms. "We can never reach them; the reward is in the journey" or something like that that sounded smart to me. And my advisor responded, "What? Never reach them? It's all in the journey? I don't read Plato to keep me off the streets! You've got to be more precise than that."

I don't go to church to keep me off the streets either, and if the reason we gather together is community, then we should be able to articulate the blessings of community.

The glimpse of the community we get in our lesson from the Hebrew Bible is not a happy one. Sodom and Gomorrah are two cities, two communities famous for just two things – their wickedness and subsequent destruction. In the passage we hear today, Abraham and God, Yahweh, have an incredible conversation. A conversation in which, shockingly, Abraham haggles with Yahweh and manages to change God's mind about destroying the cities.

Let me just say a couple of things here. First of all, let's get out of the way any leftover bad interpretations of the Bible that claim Sodom's sin was homosexuality. Credible and reasonable interpreters throughout the ages differ on Sodom's sin – some say it was a generalized sin of injustice and lack of care for the poor and needy; others say it was a specific

sin of what can only be called gang rape, certainly not anywhere in the same universe as same sex attraction.

Also, it is important to note that while the Book of Genesis is the first book of the Bible, it was written considerably later than many of the other books and it had many different authors. It is likely that the part immediately following what we read today, the actual destruction of Sodom, was from a far older tradition. A tradition that was trying to make sense of what was probably the real destruction of the city by natural disaster or human power. The part we read today is a later theological reflection on God's justice. Got that? Good!

The communities of Sodom and Gomorrah have been wicked and God confides to Abraham that they must be destroyed. If that sounds harsh to us, if we are alarmed at the depiction of an angry and unforgiving Old Testament God who visits destruction on the unjust from above, then we must look critically at our own behavior. Were there no righteous in the cities of Coventry or Dresden or Nagasaki? Do the drones of the Obama administration not kill the righteous along with the wicked when they rain death from the sky in Pakistan?

But perhaps we hold God to a higher standard than our own primitive notions of justice. Abraham certainly does. Abraham reacts to God's plan of destruction with disbelief, "Far be it from you to do such a thing" he says, which is tame compared to how it should be translated, "That would be profane...polluted, contaminated, impure!"¹ Abraham's point is that the justice or injustice of the people is inconsequential compared to the character of God. And God is characterized by holiness. God is persuaded by Abraham to act accordance with God's own character...which is to be merciful. Injustice is still injustice, but God is still God.

¹ Walter Brueggemann. *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching: Genesis*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 162-176.

This may tell us fascinating things about the character of God, but there are surprising implications for the community. If it is not in God's nature to destroy the righteous with the wickedness, then good people have a healing effect on the entire community. It is the opposite of a few bad apples spoiling the barrel. Goodness and righteousness are infectious, infectious the way laughter is infectious.

We don't have to believe in an angry sky god who is withholding thunderbolts because we're standing next to someone nice, in order for this idea to take hold of us. It's not really about the numbers that Abraham and Yahweh exchange like a savvy buyer in a Middle Eastern bazaar; it's about how we see the community, perhaps this community, as a place where justice can take root.

There is an African proverb which says, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." This is the community Abraham believes in.

We can feel surrounded by indifference, cynicism, maybe even wickedness and yet the healing power of a few there is the possibility of a new future for the entire community. But that is only true when we have a stake in the outcome, when we risk counting on each other.

Abraham's brother, Lot, lives in Sodom with his family and escapes the carnage. However, Indian theologian Stanley Samartha imagines Lot's wife, the one who becomes a pillar of salt, facing the brimstone that sweeps away her home, saying, "Why did I look back? Because my neighbors were out there. When, during the birth of my first child, I cried out in

pain, the women were there. They held my hands, wiped my brow, gave me water to drink. And when the baby was born, they bathed it and put it to my breast.”²

“I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” This is not just a description of community, but a creedal statement about community. I am willing to let my destiny be caught up with yours. It is worth the risk. I am worth the risk; you are worth the risk if we have faith that love cannot be frustrated by even the most lost, the most immoral society. We need not be overwhelmed by evil and sadness if we have believe that the smallest bit of beauty and goodness is enough – enough to make the rest of it worth saving. So, in the end, it turns out I do come here for my salvation. You’re saving me and I’m saving you.

² Stanley Samartha. “Why I Did Not Look Back”. *Stories Seldom Told: Biblical Stories Retold for Children and Adults*. Lois Wilson. British Columbia, Canada:Northstone, 1997. 171.