

GOD ACTING LIKE GOD

Genesis 18:20-32

Luke 11:1-13

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TEXT: Luke 11:13 “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

PURPOSE: To invite us, in our prayer and in our action, to be confident of the generous, loving, approachable character of God.

Teachers of preaching like to say that sermons are completed in the hearts of the hearers. I totally agree with that. But let's be a little unconventional today, and involve the imaginations and the voices of you who are listening in getting this sermon started. I'm going to invite you to complete a thought. Call out whatever comes to mind. Applying this idea to anybody, fill in the blank: “Now you're acting like _____” Okay, complete the thought as something you might say to a small child: “Now you're acting like _____” Try it with a teenager in mind: “Now you're acting like _____” Now, give it a negative application. Now try it with a positive application. Fun, huh?

How about this? “Now you're acting like a parent.” When is a parent acting like a parent? If your child asks you for a fish, and you give a snake, that is not acting like a parent. If your child asks you for an egg, and you give a scorpion, that is not acting like a parent. Those are examples Jesus offered, but it's obvious: we are acting like a parent when we give good gifts to our children.

Jesus said, God is just like that, acting like a parent, only ever so much more so. He put it this way: “If you, who are evil”—I suspect we object to him calling us evil, but that's beside the point—“If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Today's passage from Luke features Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray. In fact, the teaching is less about how we are supposed to pray, and more about what the God to whom we pray is like: like a father who is worthy of our respect, one who can be depended on to meet both our material and our spiritual needs. The prayer we call “The Lord's Prayer,” Luke's version being shorter than the one we know, tells us that God is acting like God when God gives daily bread to those who ask, when God forgives those who ask, when God delivers those who ask from trials and temptations and tribulations. The parable Jesus shared tells us that God is acting like God when God acts like the friend who gets out of bed to give us bread so we can offer proper hospitality to an unexpected, late-arriving guest.

I hear Jesus inviting us to be as audacious in our prayer as was the fellow who dared to wake up his friend, knowing, as the friend in need knew, that God can be depended on to meet our need. I hear Jesus directing us to ask, and seek, and knock in full confidence that the one who asks, receives; that the one who seeks, finds; and that for the one who knocks, a door will be opened, because of who we are asking, because who is aiding our search,

because of whose door we are knocking on.

Immediately after the people's great sin of making and worshiping the golden calf while Moses was up on the mountain getting the ten commandments, here's what God had to say to Moses about how God is supposed to act:

"The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children
to the third and fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7)

Probably none of us likes children suffering on account of their parents' sin, even though, tragically that is what happens all too often. Anyway, compare just four generations of consequences to steadfast love offered for thousands of generations, and grace seems to abound. Besides, later prophets heard God limiting the consequences of sin to the sinner only. (Jeremiah 31:29-30, Ezekiel 18:1-5) So God is acting like God when God is gracious, and patient with us, and demonstrates trustworthy and lasting steadfast love. In his teaching on prayer, I hear Jesus inviting our confidence that God really is extravagantly gracious, that God's steadfast love does endure forever, and that God seeks to save us from trial and tribulation.

With that in mind, let's return to that conversation between God and Abraham which was in today's passage from the Book of Genesis. God, appearing as one of three mysterious beings, had just visited Abraham. Abraham and Sarah had greeted the threesome with extravagant hospitality. During that visit, God has promised them a son, even though Sarah was barren and way past the typical age for childbearing. After that extraordinary promise, God chose to confide in Abraham regarding an upcoming investigation of the wicked goings-on in Sodom and Gomorrah.

With that, one of the most audacious interchanges between God and a person recorded in scripture or anywhere else begins. Basically, Abraham was challenging God to act like God. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" he asked. (Genesis 18:25) His strategy for challenging God was to employ some good old Near Eastern bartering. "Okay, God, I'll admit that these cities are rotten with wickedness. But I'll bet there are at least a few righteous people living there. If you found, say, fifty righteous people, would it be like you to wipe out those fifty along with the wicked majority? Wouldn't it be more like you to forgive the whole city for the sake of the fifty righteous people?"

“You’re right,” God answered. “I would not be true to myself if I swept away the righteous along with the wicked.” Listen carefully to God’s exact words: “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” (Genesis 18:26) This is grace and mercy far beyond our expectations. We’d think God was being godly enough if God agreed to get the fifty out of the city, and then destroyed the rest of the place. But Abraham was recognizing God’s capacity for an entirely different quality of grace. And Abraham dared to press his point, next getting God to agree to forgiving the city for the sake of forty-five righteous people, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, and finally ten. And with each reduced number, God agreed to the deal. Can you realize how utterly astounding this negotiation is? Can you imagine what it would be like for you to barter with God like this in your prayer?

We are cynically willing to accept a cruel calculus that, in modern warfare, some innocent civilians are going to be killed along with the combatants. We tolerate the terrible reality that children fleeing horrors in their home countries are going to drown when the flimsy boats transporting them across the Mediterranean sink, or when they drown crossing the Rio Grande, or die of heat exhaustion crossing our southern border by way of the Arizona desert. God says, that’s not how I act. Not only would I spare the righteous; I would spare the wicked on account of the righteous who are among them. That is God acting like God. That is God’s kind of mercy and faithfulness and steadfast love.

I hear this story as authorizing us to engage with God the way Abraham did. First of all, the story says that we are within our rights to press God to act like God. But that kind of praying, like all truly faithful praying, has the result of changing the one who is praying. That kind of praying presses us to be merciful, as God has been merciful to us, to seek the redemption of people who are wicked, not their destruction, and to understand ourselves not as people whom God will somehow snatch out of this wicked world, doomed to destruction, but as the means by which God shares redeeming love and transforming mercy to everyone in the whole world, no exceptions.

I spent my first summer while in seminary in New York City operating under the pretense that I was supervising a group of teenage boys who were being paid through some sort of work program to do odd jobs around the church and community center where I was doing my field education. In reality, I was a joke to them, and most of the time, I was at their mercy. One of their favorite pranks was to turn out the lights in a room where we were working and pelt me with wet rolls of toilet paper. I deeply resented the way they behaved, but I felt helpless to improve our relationship. One day, in the carpentry shop, they didn’t bother to turn out the lights before mounting their attack. I’d had enough. I grabbed one of the wet rolls and lobbed it back, hitting Danny Mendoza, the biggest, meanest kid in the

group. He wasted no time coming back at me and bloodying my lip with his fist. Humiliated, I dismissed them and went home, my proverbial tail between my legs. Following the theme of my message this morning, I realized I had not acted like the adult in the room. I would have been well within my rights to fire Danny and present that as a warning to the rest of the group. But something—dare we think of it as God’s gift of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus assured us God would give to those who ask for it?—Something nudged me to choose a different course of action. Something nudged me toward grace and mercy and forgiving as I had been forgiven.

All the boys showed up for work the next morning, and all of them were a bit sheepish. They looked at me; I looked at them. I said something along the lines of, Look, things have gotten out of hand, and that’s had as much to do with me as with you. So how about if we try something different? How about if you go home and get your swim trunks and a towel, and you get paid to spend the day with me at the community pool?” You’re not surprised that agreement to this plan was unanimous and enthusiastic. You’re probably also not surprised that Danny apologized right off, and that the day served as the start for a much more constructive relationship.

This story is a clumsy parallel to what went on between God and Abraham, because first of all, calling down fire and brimstone on the whole bunch of them was not an option at my disposal. And, instead of saving the wicked because of the righteous among them, my option would have been to single out and get rid of one bad guy and then try to figure out what to do with the rest of them. But what happened with that group of boys and me arrived at the same place where Abraham and God got to—the place where extravagant grace and undeserved forgiveness offered the prospect of redemption, of renewal, of righteousness. Tragically, Sodom rejected that offer, and it didn’t go well for them. Blessedly, the boys and I embraced the offer, and it went very well for us.

God is inviting us to act like the people whom God has redeemed, which is who we are in Christ. God is inviting us to be the righteous ones in the city, not to give in to the wickedness around us, not to seek our deliverance at the cost of other’s destruction, but to embody God’s grace and mercy in such a way as to participate in God saving the whole world. When we pray in that spirit, we are acting like the people of God, like people who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit.