

Genesis 18:20-33

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Colossians 2:6-15

St. Luke 11: 1-13

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, I was a chaplain at a diocesan camp organized for families. In other words, instead of children being sent off to camp for a week leaving parents behind, this particular one-week camp was for whole families: parents and children. As chaplain, I interacted with both groups. At all the meals I made a point of sitting with different families. Among all these were those who were very active in their home churches, and others, well, not so much. One person talked to me about why they didn't attend church regularly. She said, "I go to church to feel inspired." I responded, that the purpose of attending church is not to feel inspired. That is not the reason one goes. The reason for attending church is because there is something that we need to do whether we feel inspired or not. The person's jaw dropped to the floor, a look of astonishment filled their eyes, they choked, and the red punch they were drinking came out their nose. What?!

Well, if feeling inspiration is not the reason, then what is? Why are we here? We are here not because we have something we want to feel. We are here because we have something to do. This "something to do" is our recognizing who we are talking to and what we are talking about. Recognizing who we are talking to, and what we are talking about, elevates "something to do" into we have something we absolutely need to do. We attend the liturgy because there is something we need to do.

The Old Testament reading picks up from last week. The visitors to Abraham, now finished with their meal, move on to scope out Sodom and Gammorah, names that carry a lot of freight. Cutting to the chase, the name Sodom has traditionally been identified with homosexuality. That's because of a play on the word, "know." In the Bible, the word "know" is often a euphemism for sexual intercourse as in "Abraham knew his wife and she conceived a son." In the story, the citizens of Sodom demand that Lot bring these strangers out so "we may know them." And Lot, to not violate the taboo of failing to protect strangers you've taken under your roof, offers the crowd his daughters instead. Yikes! Whether this story is related to contemporary issues of same-sex intimate relations is dubious.

There is a wonderful hymn from the 1940 Hymnal that didn't make it into the 1982 hymnal revision called, *City Not Made with Hands*. The second verse says, "Where 'er the gentile heart finds courage from above; Where 'er the heart forsook, warms with the breath of love; Where 'er faith bids fear depart, City of God thou art." The one sure thing about the cities of Sodom and Gammorah, cities of God they aren't.

If cities of God they aren't, because there aren't even 10 people in them with courage from above, and hearts warmed with the heart of love, and who live not from fear, but from faith, all of which makes for a City of God; then what is God whose city this is really like? Abraham asks a question. Will you really destroy the righteous with the wicked? Do you really want the righteous to share the same fate as the wicked? "Shall not the judge of all the world do right?"

Do we have any idea of how unprecedented, how radically never-before-seen and utterly new this question is? What did people of that time and even down to today think God was really like? In a word, people thought of god and gods as one who says, “If you’re gonna make an omelet, you gotta break some eggs.” People had not yet come to think of the divine as both monotheistic, and transcendent. The divine was many divinities. There might be one more powerful than all the others, but be that as it may, could not be called almighty. Such gods were the personifications of the natural forces that, for no apparent reason, both sustained and destroyed life. These personified forces had all the flaws that characterized human beings. Religion was the practical means of getting these forces on your side to provide benefits and to ward off harms. The sacrifice of animals and even humans was about killing something else so that you wouldn’t be. No one put divine and morality or righteousness in the same sentence.

Abraham asks, “Will not the judge of all the world do right?” Fast forward to the story of David and Bathsheba. Would the Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar have lost any sleep over taking the wife of one of his soldiers into his harem? Does this matter to anyone at all? In *Casablanca*, Rick says to Ilsa, “The problems of two people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.” Is he right? “Shall not the Judge of all the world do right?” Abraham asks, which is to say it does matter. An emperor or a minor king taking for himself, the wife of one of his soldiers matters to God.

What are we doing here? Who are we talking to? What are we talking about? We just looked at how ancient people’s thoughts of the divine emerged from formative experiences of their lives. What formative experiences of our lives influences our thoughts about the divine? How about school? We can easily spend a quarter to a third of our lives in schools of all sorts. It is an experience thrust upon us. There are rules, expectations, like attending and performing, along with evaluation and grades. There are authorities whose task is to convey what has been determined that we must know in order to participate in society, which imposes sanctions on those who refuse to learn what is expected. Doesn’t church feel like school with people sitting in rows and someone up front talking, not necessarily to, but at us? After a certain amount of time, we graduate, passing beyond the requirements of attendance, evaluation, and performance. Summer comes and we’re let out for vacation. Since school is no longer required, but is now optional, we might choose to come out of habit, or because we hope to hear a lecture that will leave us inspired. But, is this really what Church is, or is it something else? Is it something so different as to be unprecedented, and really never-before-seen until now, like Abraham’s question to God about should the righteous fare as the wicked?

Today’s reading from Colossians says things about Christ. *For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fulness in him. You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the wisdom of God who raised him from the dead. You who were dead in trespasses, God has made alive together with him.* What are we doing here? Who are we talking to? We’re talking to the one who has done, and is doing, this. What are we talking about? We’re talking about what all this means for us and as a result How we are to live.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus’s disciples ask him to teach them to pray, “as John the Baptist taught his disciples.” Jesus’s answer comes to be known as “The Lord’s Prayer,” which is something that even in an ever-increasing secular culture, people with even the most minimal experience of the Christian faith can bring to their remembrance and recite, including even the very old whose mental capacity is greatly diminished. Jesus does not give a rote formula, but a summary statement that really does cover all the bases of who we are from beginning to end.

Our *Book of Common Prayer* also has a summary statement, or you might call a statement of purpose for engaging in the liturgy. *Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of Almighty God our heavenly Father, to render thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things necessary for our life and for our salvation.* This last purpose is critical, particularly the word “salvation. What is salvation anyway? Salvation is everything said in today’s reading from Colossians.

What about those things necessary for our lives and the lives of others? These are covered in the points Jesus makes in the Lord’s Prayer. What are those things? The first point is justice as in “hallowed by thy name,” and “thy Kingdom come.” In the Bible, the word “justice” means things as God wants them to be. This is much more than justice as giving people their due. If God just giving people their due is all justice is, then no one would have any hope at all. The Kingdom that is to come is where all that is, is as God wants it to be. This will flow into mercy in “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Between these there is our situation now as embodied persons and our embodied selves receiving what is needed to go on living. Finally, there is the sober realism of ourselves as flawed, our tendency to both selfishness and hubris, which if left unchecked we’ll drive ourselves over the precipice of self-destruction. This is what “Lead us not into temptation” means. It is not about shoplifting. The word temptation is really about a process akin to forging iron with extreme heat and stress into tempered steel. The contemporary version of the Lord’s Prayer renders “Lead us not into temptation,” as “Save us from the time of trial.” In other words, a situation where without God, all is lost.

Today’s readings tell us that there is a lot at stake. Today’s readings are about what matters in an ultimate sense. They are about something way more than feeling inspired. Today’s readings are about what matters most to ourselves because of how it matters to God. It matters to God that we be here. It matters to God that we recognize who we are talking with, and what is being talked about. It matters to God, all of it, which makes it something we need to do, really.