

**“A Time and Place for Boldness”**  
**Genesis 18:16-32; Luke 11:1-13**  
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Dana’s mother was a woman of strong conviction and bold speech. I called her “the loose cannon” but only in love and admiration. She knew what she believed and spoke her mind and often took my side in any dispute which, of course, made her a brilliant woman as well.

In my first setting after marriage, the first time Dana’s parents came to visit us, an older deacon approached me after worship and said, “That mother-in-law of yours certainly thinks a lot of you.” He was a wonderful man who was very supportive of me, but he was shaking when he spoke. I wondered what Joann had said to him. So, I asked her. “He said, ‘That son-in-law of yours is going to be a fine preacher one day,’” she said, “And I told him, ‘What do you mean one day?’” Well, I was only twenty-seven at the time, but she thought he was damning me with faint praise, and so she let him have it!

But she spoke her mind no matter where she was or with whom she was talking. On one occasion, the CEO of Dana’s father’s company stood up on a chair and whistled for a drink at a cocktail party. Joann looked at him with a raised eyebrow. So, he said, “You think I’m rude, don’t you?” “Yes, I do,” she said, giving Dana’s father cause for an ulcer. You don’t want your spouse speaking this way to your boss. But the CEO had Joann sit next to him at dinner. He wasn’t offended by her boldness. She was the only person who wouldn’t cringe in his presence, the only one who would be honest with him. He valued that.

There is a time and place for boldness. In fact, quite often this is what God wants from us. Many of us were taught to be very careful and proper in our communication with God. We were taught to be respectful in talking to our parents and other adults and thus there was no place for anything but reverence when we talked to God. And what we are taught as children stays with us. Thus, our prayer life to this day is careful and restrained. But God knows what we are thinking and how we feel

whether are forthcoming or not. God prefers honesty and boldness in our communication, as two of our readings today make clear.

In the reading from Genesis, Abraham is bold in his efforts to persuade God not to destroy an entire city until it has been determined how many good and faithful people might be lost with the evil and unfaithful. We know this story well, though many common assumptions about it are not found in the biblical text.

God tells Abraham about the outcries against Sodom and Gomorrah which have persuaded God to destroy them. The text does not say what great sins have doomed the cities, though the term “outcry” is used in Exodus in reference to Israel’s enslavement in Egypt (3:7) and the abuse of widows and orphans (22:21-23). Ezekiel 16 says the problem was that the people were proud and wealthy and did not help the poor and needy, and that they were haughty and did “abominable things” (16:49-50). But what were these abominable things?

The text does not say, but what happens in Genesis 19 is an outrageous violation of hospitality practices. Lot extends hospitality to two visitors who happen to be messengers of God, just as Abraham extends hospitality to visitors in Genesis 18. Hospitality is a significant expression of faith. But rather than expanding Lot’s welcome to these visitors, the men of Sodom gather around Lot’s home and threaten the visitors with violence, sexualized violence, rape. It is not a pretty story. Lot even offers his daughters to the men instead of the visitors. It is a horrible story and it is clear that what is involved is abominable.

But there is nothing in the text about a more general view of same-gender relationships. There is only judgment on violence which we understand. There is a line of interpretation that draws much broader conclusions, but these are not found in the text. The best we can tell, they originate with sixth century Byzantine Emperor Justinian who first used the term “sodomy” in a pointed way much as sixth-century Pope Gregory the Great first referred to Mary of Magdala as a prostitute. The latter error was finally corrected by Pope Paul VI in 1969.

In any event, the sins seem to include greed, pride, mistreatment of the poor, sexual violence and a profound lack of hospitality. Lest the

latter concern seem trivial, a more recent parallel might prove helpful. On February 13, 1692 about thirty members of Clan MacDonald in the Glencoe region of Scotland were killed in the night by the very people to whom they provided hospitality. It was connected to a complicated series of events following the failed Jacobite uprising, and the violence would have been despicable no matter what the circumstances, but to assault welcome guests or those who welcome you is added sacrilege.

So, there is no disputing the fact that God has a solid case against the people of Sodom and perhaps Gomorrah. Abraham just wonders whether the entire city needs to be wiped out. What if there are fifty righteous people left, he asks God, could the city be spared? And as we know, he argues the point all the way down to ten people. And God says “O.K.” – if ten can be found, “O.K.” In the end, they can’t be found. Only Lot is redeemable, at least in some ways. So, the city is destroyed.

But notice how Abraham approaches God and how God responds. Abraham is not reserved and respectful to the point of keeping his thoughts to himself. He is bold in making his claim, in effect arguing with God, almost trying to talk God down from a would-be harsh judgment. *Maybe there are some good people there. Shouldn't we try to save them?* And God doesn't zap Abraham for being impertinent. On the contrary, God hears his arguments and allows time to process his suggestions. It is a fascinating exchange which reveals not only that not all things are fixed in God's plan but that God values boldness and honesty. In fact, as a mentor of mine insisted years ago, honesty may be the one thing God wants from us more than anything else.

In the reading from Luke, Jesus offers a similar perspective on what God might be looking for in us. His disciples observe him taking time for prayer, as he has many times before, and they ask him to teach them how to pray, as John taught his disciples. He offers an example of prayer that is similar to the one we share each week, though we follow Matthew's form of this prayer, slightly adjusted over time. Many scholars believe Luke's version may be closer to Jesus' actual words while Matthew's version has been altered for liturgical purposes. It flows more smoothly while Luke's version is more cryptic.

But the essence of the two forms of the prayer is the same. The focus is on God's reign and our making changes as opposed to our asking God to change. The petitions are for daily bread, forgiveness and the ability to stay away from temptation. It is a prayer which echoes many Jewish teachings of the time

After providing this example, Jesus tells a short story designed to convey a message. A neighbor asks for bread in the middle of the night and eventually is given bread because of his persistence. In like manner, he says, God rewards persistence. So, there is a calling for boldness and initiative, a willingness to make our case and ask for what we need.

It may seem like Jesus is saying that persistence guarantees specific results. Ask and it will be given to you, he says. But at the end of this passage, he says that what God will give to those who ask is the Holy Spirit. The only thing we are promised is God's presence and love. But while Jesus is not saying that God gives us everything we want if we ask for it often enough, he is encouraging us to ask, to be bold, to take initiative. It is a message very much like the one we find in Genesis 18.

So, what are the implications of these texts for us? For one thing, there is a calling for more boldness and honesty in our prayer life, more *hutzpah* in the way we relate to God - not a lack of reverence nor a mood of presumption, just a willingness to say what we think and ask for what we need. They are good guidelines for any relationship, including our relationship to God – say what we think and ask for what we need.

I think of this prayer of a rural southern preacher.

Lord, send us rain. The ground is dry and hot and burns the bare feet walking over it. The tobacco leaves next to it are curling up. The cotton plants are wilting in the sun. The corn stalks are already stunted in their growth, the fodder leaves are withering, there won't be anything but nubbins, and Lord thou knowest I hate worse than hell to shuck nubbins. So. Lord, send us rain. Don't send us any flimsy drizzle drizzle. Send us a gully washer and a trash mover. (*Harry Emerson Fosdick*, by Robert Moats Miller, p. 239)

We understand the focus of this prayer. We have needed rain this summer and gotten some this week. We also see the value of honesty. God knows what we feel and think. The psalmist says, “Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely (139:4).” Who are we fooling when try to hold back the truth?

So, if we feel wounded and abandoned by God, we should express these feelings openly. If we feel thankful and full of joy, we should say so. If we have questions that keep us up at night, we should name them with our Maker. If we think we have figured out something important, we should test our ideas with God. Whatever we are thinking or feeling about life or faith, whether we think the subject matter is petty or significant, we should honestly and boldly express it to God. Whatever we have to say, God can take it, God knows we think or feel anyway, and God will understand like no one else can.

But while today’s texts call us to seek more honesty and boldness in our prayer life, they also call us to seek more honesty and boldness in other areas of life and faith, both as individuals and as a community of faith. There is a time and place for caution, but there is also a time and place for courage, there is a time and place for boldness. And for the church in our culture today, this is such a time and place.

There have been times when a laid-back approach was “O.K.” For example, in the boom years after World War II, it seemed like everyone went to church and all churches were full. When people moved, they visited a church of their denomination in their neighborhood a time or two and then joined. Those days are gone. The percentage of Americans attending church on a given Sunday has been declining steadily for decades and is sliding down in the teens now. The number of “nones” and “dones” is increasing. We know this by now.

The question is - how we will respond? The primary answer needs to be – with boldness! This is not a time for business-as-usual church, though the essence of the Gospel and the basic character of Christian community have not changed and these are the primary things we have to offer. But how do we offer them to people who need them but may resist them for various reasons, some of which we understand? Boldly and honestly!

In the realm of boldness, I think of the give-back food truck, a new and different idea designed to serve people in need while attracting people to our physical space who might not otherwise come. In my ten years here I have heard a lot of ideas about how to attract people. As I have said before, we need to move beyond the attractional model of church where we think it's all about getting people to come to us. We need to go to where people are. Jesus said, "Go ye!" not "Y'all come!"

But this does mean that we don't still want to do everything we can to invite people into this space, into community with people here, into an intimate relationship with the God who was in Christ. I just haven't heard a single idea that will attract as many people, especially hesitant people, into our space as barbecue will, especially with a give-back component. It is a popular concept and for good reason. So, what we are doing makes sense, but it is a bold idea. It is new and different as is the concept of alternative revenue streams which we are still pondering.

We need such boldness. We need more proposals like this. Some of what the facilities assessment committee is working on falls into this category, especially the possibility of partnering with Campbell University and/or other parties to accomplish more than we could by ourselves and to integrate the church into the community in exciting ways. All of this is still in-process. The church will be having dialogues this fall when we have more details on the costs and benefits of various approaches. But we have an opportunity to do something bold.

But with such boldness we also need honesty – honesty about our limits, honesty about our questions and doubts as we talk to people about faith, honesty about our struggles and joys. Honesty and authenticity are critical to Christian witness in this time, especially as we encounter people who have been put off by a kind of faith that seems artificial.

In the end, Abraham does not save Sodom and Gomorrah, but he tries his best to serve the interests of people in those cities. In the end, even Jesus doesn't get everything he prays for, as in the Garden he pleads for a way other than the cross. But boldness and honesty are the best we have to offer and they are what God wants from us. So, may we embrace these qualities and be willing to leave the results to God.