



Prayer as Conversation

Genesis 18:16-33

TRINITY PULPIT

One of the top quoted movie lines of all time comes from a 1967 film starring Paul Newman. Cool Hand Luke is an American cinema classic. The final scene has the character, played by Paul Newman, a stubborn prisoner now on the loose, quoting a line from earlier in the movie uttered by a brutal captain. At the end of the movie the stubborn prisoner has made an escape from the chain gang and, on the run, he hides in a church. Then, surrounded by authorities, he walks to the window and utters those now famous words, “What we have here is a failure to communicate.”

I think it is ironic that this iconic phrase is uttered in a church. Surely, the inability to communicate and have holy conversations has been the death and detriment of many a congregation. This is also true for us as followers of Jesus. As the church, our failure to communicate with God on an ongoing basis can be our spiritual weakness. We may look at our own life and say of our relationship with God, “What we have here is a failure to communicate.”

We have already established our need for prayer and how essential it is for our relationship with God. Now we turn our attention to prayer as conversation. When you look for a definition of conversation, you find that what is essential, according to every definition, is at least two people. You are not really having a conversation if you are just talking to yourself. Conversation is something that happens between individuals. It requires two people. I want us to explore the idea of thinking of prayer as conversation.

The text I have chosen for us to consider is one of the great mysterious texts of the Bible. It is this odd encounter of Abraham, his wife Sarah, and what the Bible describes as three men. What follows are two stories: a promise of a child and the judgment and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the middle

of these two stories is a conversation between Abraham and God. It sounds like a bartering session from American Pickers, but it is something much more significant. Let’s look at this story and see what we might glean about prayer as conversation.

The story begins at the beginning of Chapter 18 of Genesis. We are told that the Lord appeared to Abraham. Abraham is there at his tent and he looks up and sees three men. Many times the three men are described as three visitors. The identity of these three visitors is hard to identify. In this conversation, the three sometimes act as one; yet, in the conversation between Abraham and God, there are moments when Abraham seems to speak to one particular visitor and God — or the Lord — also speaks to Abraham in a way that is separate from the other two visitors. Most scholars believe that what is described is a visit from God and two angels; since, in Chapter 19, the two angels make a visit to Sodom where Lot and his family are living. Holding these two chapters together are these three visitors, and one seems to be God himself. The first announcement that the three visitors bring is the news that Abraham and Sarah will have a child. After years of barrenness, in her old age, Sarah will bear a child. We are reminded that this was an act of grace and an act of God. When Sarah hears that she is going to have a child she laughs. She laughs because, as she says, “I am worn out and my husband is old and now I will have this pleasure?” (Sarcasm included) The Lord reminds her there is nothing God cannot do. She will surely have a child. The visit of the three begins with a reminder of the power of God and also the grace and goodness of God.

The story then makes a move to another topic. They get up and begin to walk together. Abraham and the three visitors are walking together and their attention turns to Sodom. The Lord asks the other two if he should hide what he is planning to do to Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet,

God indicates that Abraham is chosen and God has just announced that the child of promise is coming. So, God chooses to reveal to Abraham what God is going to do to Sodom and Gomorrah. We are reminded that living in Sodom and Gomorrah is Lot, Abraham's nephew and his family.

Don't miss this scene. In between a message of birth and hope and a message of judgment and destruction, Abraham is walking and conversing with God. They are walking together and talking together. Imagine the diverse feelings of joy and grief. Imagine the feelings of hope and hopelessness. Between these opposing feelings Abraham is walking with God and is in conversation with God.

Now interestingly, God never announces his plan to sweep away Sodom and Gomorrah. God only mentions the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord says that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous. The Lord says that there is an outcry that has reached the Lord. The Lord says, "I will go down and look for myself and I will know it is true."

Now what was the great sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? We assume that the great sin is Sodomy, which is described in the horribly abusive description of the desire of the men of Sodom toward the angels once they reach Sodom. However, this sinful intent is not the only sin that is mentioned in the Bible about Sodom. In fact, we discover that the sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah is vast. In Isaiah, the sin of Sodom is described as injustice toward others and the people parading their sin without shame. Jeremiah describes it as adultery and lack of repentance. Ezekiel 16:49 gives us a list of the sins of Sodom. "The people are arrogant, over fed, unconcerned about the poor and the needy and do detestable things." In other words the great sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is not simply the desire of the evil men toward the visitors in Chapter 19 — that was just a symptom of something much deeper. Their real sin was a selfishness that disregarded the well being of others. They had an arrogance and pride that thought they could live without any accountability toward God or others. They had developed a culture in the cities on the plain where they were over fed; that is, they had more than enough while at the same time there was no concern for the poor and the needy. This was the culture of the cities on the plain that God says way crying out to him.

Now notice what happens next. Abraham makes an assumption about the character of God. God has yet to say he is planning to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for this sin. In fact, God says, "I am going to go and inves-

tigate whether this is all true." Yet, Abraham assumes God's actions. Then we have this incredible conversation between Abraham and God. Abraham approaches God and essentially says, "What type of God are you going to be? Are you the kind of God that would sweep away the righteous with the wicked? How fair is that? Would you really destroy it all and not save those who are righteous?" Then Abraham challenges God's character: "Far be it from you to do such a thing — to kill the righteous with the wicked. You surely will not treat the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

God goes with the assumption and answers, "If I find fifty righteous I will spare the whole place." Then the conversation continues. Each time Abraham is praying or asking God to save the city on account of the righteous. The conversation moves from Abraham asking God what God will do if a certain amount of righteous people is found in Sodom and Gomorrah. Each time moving from 50 people to 10 people, God promises that if that amount of righteous people can be found, then God will not destroy the cities. It appears as barter between Abraham and God but it really is not barter. It is not barter because in barter you are trying to convince someone to give something up to come to a conclusion or an agreement. Notice that the only one giving up in this conversation is Abraham. Abraham keeps coming down with the number but God, from the beginning to the end of the conversation, has the same response: If they find righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah, then he will spare the cities.

It is one of the great conversations of Scripture and for us today, we want to explore what prayer as conversation might mean. What do we learn from this conversation?

First, we learn that when we are willing to enter into conversation with God, God is willing to reveal God's ways to us. This conversation begins first because Abraham is walking with the Lord. In verse 16 we are told that when the men got up, Abraham got up and walked along with them. Abraham could have stayed right there at the tent. We are told that it was the heat of the day and Abraham had already received the promise he wanted from God. Abraham could have said, "Well, that is all I wanted from God. I just wanted a child, so thanks, God. Now go on your way." But Abraham gets up and walks with God. In that willingness to walk with God, God says Abraham is chosen and his family is chosen to keep the way of the Lord and do what is right. So because God has chosen Abraham and because Abraham is willing to walk with the Lord, the Lord does not hide his plans but reveals his plans.

Jesus said in John 15:15,

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Jesus says to his disciples, you are my friends because I have revealed to you what God is doing. One of the most amazing things in the world is the fact that God wants to reveal to us what God is doing. God wants us to understand God's plan and ways. God wants us to know Him.

God has chosen you and me in Christ. God has a plan for you and me in Christ. This is not to be a great mystery for us to guess at, but God wants us to enter into conversation so that we might know the will of God. Prayer as conversation assumes that God is going to speak and God is going to reveal God's ways to us.

Second, in this prayer or conversation of Abraham we discover a great boldness. Abraham walks with God and in this conversation there is great boldness from Abraham. There is something very important here that we may struggle with, but I think we must note it as scripture. Let's look at verse 22. In verse 22 the Bible says, "Abraham remained standing before God." Yet my Bible — like I am sure many of yours — has a footnote at the end of that verse. Here is what my Bible's footnote says the ancient Hebrew scribal tradition reads, "The Lord remained standing before Abraham." Now what does that mean? What it means is that the oldest texts read that Abraham did not stand before God but God stood before Abraham. In other words, Abraham was in charge of this conversation. Now we have a hard time with this, and so did a Hebrew scribe at one time; therefore, the scribe made a change in the text so that it no longer read, "God stood before Abraham," because that could not be right. We can understand the scribe's theological problem. Man stands before God and not God before man. However, if we are going to truly deal with this text, we have to note that it seems the original text said God stood before Abraham. God did not walk away. God stayed with Abraham as though Abraham was in control of the conversation.

What type of God stays before man or woman? One who has a desire to be in relationship with us. This is the same God that comes walking in the cool of the day in the Garden of Eden after man and woman sin. This is the same God that keeps coming back and showing up. Whether it is in a burning bush, a whisper to Samuel, a wrestling match with Jacob or a mysterious presence in a fiery furnace. You see, God keeps coming back, showing

up, calling out...standing before and not walking away. Of course God comes fully in a crying baby in Bethlehem. The God who stands before Abraham keeps coming to us. Standing near us is where God longs to be. We are also reminded of the relationship we have with God. This kind of relationship is one that begs for conversation. It creates boldness in our conversation with God. Abraham is very bold as he essentially questions the character of God. Abraham says, "Far be it from you," or it is not like you to destroy everyone alike. Surely, the wicked and the righteous are not going to be treated the same. When we understand prayer as conversation, it creates in us the ability to be bold before God. We can pray our feelings and we can pray our doubts and we can offer our questions. The Bible is filled with hard questions for God. God can handle your questions. When we realize prayer is conversation, this boldness becomes a part of our prayers.

Third, I would say that when we learn that prayer is conversation, it could keep us from making a false assumption about God. When we are walking with God and in conversation, we guard our mind from making false assumptions about God. Since God is revealing himself to us and we are walking with God, then we begin to understand God's nature.

In our text, Abraham makes the assumption that God is going to act like anyone would act toward wickedness. God never says he is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, but Abraham assumes it. Abraham assumes that everyone gets what he or she deserves. Abraham, in fact, assumes that not only does everyone get what they deserve but those who don't deserve judgment are going to receive the same judgment from God for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thus, Abraham assumes the worst about God. Abraham confronts God with something we might say: "Is this how you are going to act?" Are you going to destroy everyone even if everyone does not deserve it?

Notice God's response. God's response is not, "Okay, I will make sure that everyone will receive what he or she deserves. If they are righteous I will save them and if they are wicked I will destroy them." No, God says, "If you can find 50 righteous people in Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Abraham has made a false assumption about God. He assumes that God is functioning like we would function — from a point of fairness and justice. God says, "That is not my character. In fact, my character is about grace. I not only will not destroy the whole city nor will I simply destroy those who deserve it...I will save it all for the sake of a few."

How many times do we make a false assumption about the nature of God? What are some false assumptions we make about God? We might assume that God is aloof. We might think God does not care and is uninvolved with creation and with us. Yet, the Bible reveals just the opposite. We might assume that we have to try to be good enough for God to love us. That is how the world works. We love those who love us and those who please us. Yet, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. God loves us, as we are right here and now. We cannot earn God's love. We might think God is just waiting for us to mess up; all God wants is a chance to demonstrate His wrath on us. Yet, even this story reminds us that God is much more concerned with finding the righteous ones than destroying the wicked. We can make false assumptions about God, but remaining in prayer — developing a conversation with God — can help us just like Abraham to know God's heart.

Fourth, in conversation with God we see ourselves. What I notice in Abraham's conversation with God is how, as the conversation continues, Abraham becomes more aware of God and less aware of self. The conversation begins with God remaining before Abraham, who speaks with boldness. Yet as the conversation continues, he becomes less bold and more aware of the greatness of God and more aware of his humanity. In fact, Abraham says that now that he has been so bold as to speak to the Lord, he describes himself as nothing but dust and ashes. As he continues, he asks God not to be angry at his continued requests. There seems to be a growing knowledge of God's greatness and Abraham's need before God the more the conversation continues.

There is something about prayer and spending time with God that begins to reveal God's character and greatness and our humanity and need. The more we are in conversation with God the more we come to rely on God and want to please God, and the more we see ourselves as dust and ashes and as created. The more we remain in the presence of God, the more we see God for who God is and the more we see ourselves as we really are.

Lastly, I think this conversation reminds us of the power of one righteous person. The conversation never gets to one, but that is where it is going. In fact, Walter Bruggemann, the great OT Theologian, suggests that we should not see this as a literal 50, 40, 30, 10, etc., but as a conversation that is making the point that there is more pow-

er in the few who are righteous than the many wicked. Bruggemann suggests that where this is headed is pointing to Christ. Can the wicked be saved by the few? The answer is yes. In fact, one can save the whole world. That one being Jesus himself.

This is a story of encouragement. Your life for Christ makes a difference. This is the history of God in the Bible. God uses Noah, the only who is righteous in his generation. God uses Abraham. One child starts the promise. God uses Israel even though Israel is least among the nations. Small in power compared to the world powers around her. God uses one life, Jesus', to change the world. Just a few who were faithful and did not run away would become the early church to change the world. Just a few can change a culture.

When D.L. Moody was just starting in the ministry he heard a preacher say, "The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully surrendered to Him." That night Moody said, "By God's grace I'll be that man!" It is said that Moody shook two continents for God and over a million souls came to Christ under his preaching and ministry. Moody had little formal education, and he was not a polished speaker. But God greatly used his life. At a memorial service some years after Moody's death, Evangelist R.A. Torrey, who had been one of his closest friends, said, "The first thing that accounts for God's using D.L. Moody so mightily was that he was a fully surrendered man. Every ounce of that two-hundred-and-eighty-pound body of his belonged to God; everything he was and everything he had, belonged wholly to God."

There is no telling what the few can do if the few are devoted to Christ.

What we have here is a failure to communicate...that might describe too many Christians today. Yet, today we recall the importance of conversation with God. We enter conversation with God because God wants to reveal to us God's ways. We enter into conversation because we are chosen, thus we pray boldly. We have conversation with God to guard us against false assumptions about God and to see God as God is and to see ourselves as we really are. We converse with God because when you choose to follow Christ, you realize God can do great things with just one life. Let that life be my life. Let that life be your life. ▲

