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Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

Persistent Exchange

Bargaining down the price of goods is part of the culture in Tanzania, an African country south of Kenya. When you go to the open air market in Tanzania, or if you stop by the side of the road where someone has set up a display of items for sale—plastic containers, arts and crafts, fruits and vegetables—prices are not marked. You ask how much, and then negotiate. So when my husband Tim and I lived in Tanzania, if we needed to buy something, we bargained for it. I should say, I bargained for it. Tim, who generally is a braver, bolder cultural explorer than I, Tim was not so keen on bargaining. Tim would just as soon pay the amount first named and be done with it, even if it meant a higher price. I, on the other hand, am genetically predisposed towards penny-pinching. I'm a cheapskate. As we lived in Tanzania, bargaining became a larger question: should we participate in the local economy as is or pay more, if we could? But in the beginning, it was more a question of translation and communication and challenge: could I calculate in my head the exchange rate, going from shillings to dollars, while also remembering how to say all these different denominations in a different language?

Could I? I could not—not at first. I remember one of my first attempts at bargaining, trying to purchase a blue plastic bowl in a language I did not quite know. The guy selling the bowl was eager, he'd seen me eyeing it, he sensed the strong potential for a transaction. I did my best to act uninterested, as in Kiswahili I threw out random and possibly nonsensical numbers. I was ready to walk away and even began doing so. But the guy saw that I could be a customer, he had commitment, saw that I was his to lose, so then he switched to English, which was clearly not that comfortable for him—but he was willing to do whatever it took. We ended up intermixing the languages, going back and forth, and then he offered me his final, generous price adjustment, in English, he said, “500? No? Ok 800?” That's not usually the direction you go when you bargain, right? I have no recollection what the final price was, I just remember I got the bowl, he got the sale, and everyone was laughing in the end.

Abraham bargains in today's first reading. As Abraham bargains, his numbers do go down, from 50, to 45, to 40, to 30, to 20, to 10. Abraham's bargaining is the beginning of a longer story of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. These cities and their story, their sin, have sometimes been used in arguments about—in arguments against—homosexuality, but the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is not about sexual orientation, it's about sexual violence. Sodom and Gomorrah is not about who a person loves, it's about what a horrible thing sexual violence is, how it is the opposite of the care and respect and dignity and hospitality that God calls us to offer one another.

Before that story, though, there's this introductory bargaining—Abraham bargaining with none other than God, bargaining as prayer. Prayer, you might wonder? Abraham bargaining is about prayer? It must be, because every Sunday there's a thematic link between the first reading and the gospel, and the gospel this week is all about prayer, including the Lord's Prayer. In today's gospel today we hear where in the Bible you can find the Lord's Prayer: in Luke. In another place, too, the Lord's Prayer is also in the gospel of Matthew, and in Matthew it sounds more like the version we say every week in church, that's closer to the version that we say, a version which is also shaped by early church practices. So also, today's gospel is about practice,

the practice of prayer, about how to pray. And so also the first reading, Abraham bargaining with God, tells us something about prayer, about how to pray.

Not that prayer is bargaining, let alone shopping—though that’s often how we pray, or at least, that’s often how I pray: “God I want... or God I need...” or “God I’ll do this if you...” Prayer is not about us trying to wheedle a deal from a divine goods dispenser. God doesn’t work like that. God does not withhold gifts unless we ask in just the right way, and God does not change his mind on a whim. If we think about prayer like that, and if we read of Abraham’s bargaining with God like that, we have a picture of a god that is impetuous, ungenerous, unforgiving—all of which is deeply unbiblical. Over and over in the Bible, we hear that God is steadfast, faithful, gracious. We see that, over and over in the Bible, in our lives, we see God’s generosity, God’s graciousness, the way God sticks with us. We do not deserve it, we cannot understand it, we simply receive it.

So what is this story, this bargaining with God over the fate of two cities, about? A reminder to God about who God is? No, a reminder to us, a reminder to us to ask God to be God, and in our asking, to align ourselves to God’s good will for us and for the world. We cannot fathom the mind of God nor the ways God works. Both are a mystery, a different country than the one we live in, another galaxy, a whole other universe. But we do know what God wants for us, wants to give us. Jesus tells us in the gospel: not a snake, not a scorpion, good things. That’s what God wants for us, and this is how God wants us to live: in the way of mercy and forgiveness.

Here, in the gospel of Luke, and in the first reading from Genesis, we are encouraged to persist in our conversations with God, to pray, to try out that language, awkward though we are at it, we can practice it. Foreign as the currency of prayer can be, we can make exchanges in it. It is okay to ask God for things you want and need. Persist at it, and find that God starts translating your prayers, telling and showing you what to ask for. We pray persistently, not because it changes God, but because it changes us. As Martin Luther says in explanation to the Lord’s Prayer, it’s not that that our prayer makes God’s kingdom come. God’s kingdom will and does come; we pray that God’s kingdom also comes to us. It’s not that our prayer makes God’s will be done; God’s will is done, we pray that God’s will be done in and among us.

That’s we pray the Lord’s Prayer so persistently. We pray that it may become the culture and country that we call home: we pray that daily bread, that a nourishing enough be persistently present in our lives; we pray that forgiveness, freedom, welcome, be persistently present in our lives, we pray that we become persistent friends knocking on God’s door, we pray that we become children persistently hungry for the food God gives, how much more does God know how to give us good things.

God’s goods are not bargained down. God doesn’t go from 50, to 45, to 40, to 30, to 20, to 10. God goes down to one: one that is priceless, one that is Christ, the embodiment of God’s gracious persistence. What God does in Jesus is like that guy in Tanzania, who wouldn’t let me walk away, who practically chased after me, who crossed over to my language so I could get what I wanted, what I needed, what he wanted me to have. In Jesus, God crosses cultures, in Jesus God translates himself, becoming human, and puts an end to our predisposition to think in terms of payment, all of our cheapskate ways. “Here,” God says in Jesus, “here is mercy and love unbounded,” “Here,” God says, “it’s all free.”