

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, July 28, 2019.**

Our lessons today are in the form of questions. The questions are ones that you and I have asked in the past and probably will continue to ask. We want to be reassured that there is a God who cares about us and goes to great extremes, especially the Crucifixion and Resurrection, to demonstrate this care.

We see Question #1 in the lesson from Genesis (**Genesis 18:20-32**). Some of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah are misbehaving. Abraham is trying hard to turn this situation around. God has called Abraham to do so, and Abraham is doing his best. But Abraham realizes that his effort to improve the situation is not producing good results. The unwanted behavior continues, and Abraham is concerned about the future of his people. So, he tries a different technique.

Instead of focusing on those who misbehave, he implores God to focus on those who do behave. Maybe God just wants to see some improvement. So Abraham tests this approach. “Will you, God, change your mind if there are 50 righteous people?” God says, “Yes, I will not sweep away the righteous with the wicked.” Abraham raises the bar: “What about 45 righteous people?” God gives the same answer. Abraham is encouraged and asks about 40, then 30, then 20, then 10. God’s answer is the same. Abraham couldn’t be happier. Maybe there is hope for Sodom and Gomorrah after all.

Well, the story doesn’t stop here. Despite God’s intent to withhold judgment, the behavior of some, including Abraham’s own family, is unacceptable, and the cities are destroyed. For today, however, let’s focus on the desire of God to let a few people who behave make up for the many people who misbehave. This is certainly a better outcome. Will somebody – just 10 people – step up so we are not all destroyed?

Question #2. Paul is writing to the Colossians (**Colossians 2:6-19**). People are asking him if there is any possibility of poor behavior disqualifying them from the love of God. The people know that there are some in their midst who are falling short of what God expects. And they are worried that, despite the faithfulness of some, the unfaithfulness of others will determine the outcome for all. Sound familiar? Paul sets them straight. “Do not let anyone disqualify you. Instead, hold fast to the head – that would be the Risen Christ - from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinew, grows with a growth that is from God.”

Paul's point is simply that in the end God is gracious. His love is not subject to a contest, to a score card. The very reason for the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus was to counter the whole notion of a behavior scale. Jesus overcame that notion. Victory was achieved. Now, the key for the people was acceptance of that love, not a perfect scorecard.

Question #3. We know this question. "How do we pray? Teach us, please. We want to do better." And Jesus does just that. "When you pray, say, 'Father, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come.'" We know the prayer that Jesus gave us. We say it weekly, if not daily, if not multiple times a day. We actually feel some ownership of this prayer. It's a special gift that Jesus gave us. The fact that this gift is shared with millions of others over many centuries doesn't change our sense of intimacy with our Lord. When we offer this prayer, we are not just following directions, but kneeling next to the Lord himself.

Here again are the three questions, stated a bit differently.

Question #1. Is your mercy, O God, enough to overcome the disobedience of your people? Or, stated in a more personal manner, is your mercy, O God, enough to overcome my failures? God's answer is yes, my mercy is mine to give, and I choose to give it to you. "Do not let anyone disqualify you."

Question #2. Is there a limit, O God, to the number of times this mercy will be granted? Or, stated in a more personal manner, have I done so much wrong that I'm no longer eligible for your mercy? Here, the answer is no. "You have not done so much wrong that you are no longer eligible. My mercy is yours, but you must accept it. There is no time limit on my part. The only limit is on your part."

Question #3. Is there a strategy for remembering this promise, O Lord? I want to believe in your mercy, but, by my behavior, I keep testing you. Is there some way of reminding myself of your mercy so that I don't disqualify myself? Here, the answer is yes. "Why do you think I taught you how to pray? Whatever else you forget, don't forget to offer the Lord's Prayer. My prayer, and now your prayer. It will remind you that I am the one who qualifies you, and I have made that decision. So, get on with you life, and, where it needs improvement, do so.

Later in Luke's gospel (**Luke 11:1-13**), God reinforces this notion. "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish. Or, if

the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion.” You can tell here that Jesus is losing patience with those who doubt the Love of God that he, Jesus, himself is delivering.

And you can hear his audience – that would be you and I - saying, “I know what you have said and what you have done. I know it, but I still can’t accept it. It seems too good to be true.”

Well, that caution would be appropriate if the mercy decision was up us. We have a hard time letting go. We have a hard time both granting and receiving mercy. But mercy on the scale of all mankind is not up to us. That’s why God steps in. That’s why God saves us from ourselves. That’s why God chose to be involved in our lives. God does for us what we seemingly cannot do for ourselves. “You are saved. End of discussion,” God says. “Your job now is to say thank you by the way you live your life and share this message.”

And God goes on. “I get it. You, my children, will always have questions. But I beg you, accept my answers. I love you, and I want you to love me. And when you cannot do that, I’ll find a way to remind you of what I expect and what is good for you. Believe me, I’ll find a way.” From **Psalms 138**: The Lord will make good his purpose for me.”

Here is one of the familiar phrases from our hymnal: “O love, how deep, how broad, how high.” Sometimes, though, it is tough to remember and appreciate this kind of love. Even at our most devout, we need reminders. That’s where you and I help one another. Not just reminders for ourselves, but assurances for others. In times of crisis, people look to those who have faced their crises with confidence. Again, that would be you and I. We are helped. And we help.

And don’t be surprised that these folks ask us some version of the three questions we’ve looked at today. And don’t be afraid to give the answers to others that God in Christ has given to us. “You are qualified for God’s mercy. God’s decision. Not yours. Not mine. God’s decision.

And if this assurance is too much to handle, try the Lord’s Prayer. This is the back-up. This is the safety valve. This is God’s medicine. Or, as our parents might say for our benefit, “Take it! It’s good for you.” Amen.