

“Kill ‘em with Kindness”

As a child I grew up with the saying that there was nothing like “Southern Hospitality.” There was something special about the way folks in the South, especially rural folks, treated people. Northerners were cold, impersonal, and even hostile. IN contrast, we in the South were gentle, kind, and welcoming. We always looked out for each other and for the stranger. There was even an amount of colorblindness to the practice. We were to help out poor black folks too. However, for many people Southern Hospitality was a myth that was only extended to those of their same station in life.

Desert Hospitality was a bit like Southern Hospitality. We saw a prime example in last Sunday’s reading from Genesis. Abraham did not just welcome the three travelers, he ran to greet them and draw them into his encampment. He invited them to come into his camp and brought them some water to drink and with which to wash their feet. By the time they got seated he has already ordered special food to prepared. Instead of just giving them a short break on their desert journey he is providing a feast for them. Little does he know that he is entertaining angels.

The three visitors this week are revealed to be YHWH and two angels who have come to investigate the sins of the cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord says to Abraham, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!” The party’s journey is one of investigation into the perfidy of these twin cities.

We might wonder why YHWH would need to make a personal investigation if God has already heard the outcries. We also might wonder why this scene with Abraham needed to be included. As I have said before, so much of Biblical interpretation and understanding comes from reading the book in context. When we pull scripture outside of its surrounding context we can set ourselves up for a poor understanding of what the writers are trying to tell us.

The Sodom and Gomorrah story is usually taken out of context so that all that we hear about is the desire of the men of these cities to abuse the travelers. Then it becomes a perverse story about deviant sexuality. But, if as they do in the movies, we dolly the camera back to show the wider scene, to include how the Lord and angels were treated by Abraham we have the option for a different understanding that fits within the context of the people and their time.

While there is graciousness and gentility involved in what is called Southern Hospitality, Desert Hospitality was about necessity. Nomads and other travelers in the desert and wilderness of the Middle East often depended on others to survive the brutal conditions of the land and environment. Abraham is gracious to the point of obsequiousness. He is falling over himself to be hospitable because that is what he would hope for if he was in the same situation as these travelers. Water, food and respite from the difficulties of travel were not just about hospitality they were a matter of life and death. The priest and the Levite of the Good Samaritan parable not only broke the laws of charity for the injured, they also broke the unwritten law of the desert that one always helps another without regard for their own welfare.

The writers of Genesis tell us the story of Abraham’s hospitality for the three angels to juxtapose it with their treatment in Sodom and Gomorrah. Instead of a welcome and offer of sustenance and rest as Abraham gives, the men of these towns

want to abuse them. The sexual deviance hinted at is the polar opposite of what Abraham offered. It is meant to be horrifying and especially in contrast to the proper welcome that Abraham provided (and Lot will provide¹). It is why it was necessary for the Lord and the angelic companions to come in person to see what was going on in those cities. It is the lack of hospitality that condemns Sodom and Gomorrah.

Another aspect of this passage of scripture is Abraham's unabashed willingness to argue with God. By this point in the passage Abraham has figured out he is not dealing with three common travelers. Indeed, he has hosted God and two accompanying angels at his homestead. As the two angels go on in their journey Abraham takes the opportunity to quiz God on the number of righteous men necessary for the cities to have in order for God to relent in destroying them. It begins with YHWH saying that if fifty righteous people are found in the city YHWH will not destroy it. Abraham connives and wheedles getting God down to ten. At which point the interchange ends.

Abraham stopping at ten is an anachronism pointing to a practice common hundreds of years later in Judaism. At the later time ten had become the minimum number of males required to constitute a representative "community of Israel" in order to have a religious service. Abraham has argued God down to ten, because without ten righteous men in the cities they cannot hold a worship or prayer service.

Each aspect of the story plays upon the importance of righteousness. Abraham is the epitome of righteousness in the way he treats the travelers. The men of the twin cities are the epitome of evil and unrighteousness. Only a righteous man can argue with God and have God listen and even relent in his judgement of those who are sinners.

If we are righteous, and that does not mean perfect or even saintly, but rather respecting God and God's teachings, we have the permission to speak to God plainly. We have the opportunity to speak out in repentance, petition, praise, and thanksgiving to a God who will listen. We can speak to God asking for goodness and not get a scorpion or snake in response. God's goodness and mercy are infinitely available to those who also show goodness and mercy to others of God's children. As long as we remember to finally pray "not my will but thy will be done."

Now, let us pray in the words of Jesus according to St. Luke:

"Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And with that all God's people said "Amen."

¹ Genesis 19: 1-11