

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Dr. Jane Maynard
Church Year C
Date: 7/24/16
Season: The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 18:20-22, Luke 11:1-13

Prayer Changes Everything

The world is too much with us.

The world is too much with us, late and soon. These words of the poet, William Wordsworth, have been on my mind lately.

The world is too much with us. Wordsworth's poignant poem describes a people out of tune with nature and with spirit, and that is how I have been feeling this month as I have watched the world go mad. Witnessing the violence in Minneapolis, Orlando, Baghdad, Baton Rouge, Dallas, Nice, Turkey and Munich, I have felt alienation, a lack of harmony, a sense of being besieged by an emotional cacophony. The world is too much with us, as we endure a violence that threatens to fragment our souls, our nation and our world.

Like the people Wordsworth described so many years ago, we are tempted to lose sight of the goodness and purity at the heart of things. To quote Michael Curry, our eloquent Presiding Bishop, we find ourselves longing for God to change this world from the nightmare it so often is into the dream God dreams for it.

Yes, we long for God to transform our nightmare into a dream. But when times are tough and we feel helpless, it is easy to lose sight of the help that is at hand. As we lose our way, we ask ourselves, how can this happen? How can God change our chaotic world into a peaceful haven?

I believe that our lessons today offer us hope. They offer hope because they remind us that we have a powerful tool at our disposal. That tool is prayer.

Prayer is a tool God has given us to transform the world's nightmare into God's dream. As Marjorie Suchocki, a Methodist theologian, puts it: Prayer is how God works with the world as it is to bring it to where it can be.

Prayer. The thoughts on prayer I'll be offering you this morning are neither final nor finished. Instead, they're an example of faith seeking understanding. They grow out of my lived experience of God and the Spirit

and they reflect the questions I ask God – real questions that grow out of my real life.

In developing the thoughts I'm sharing with you this morning, I have relied on two conversation partners. One is Marjorie Suchocki, the theologian I just named who is a feminist and a process theologian. She has written a helpful book on prayer entitled *In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer*. My second partner this morning is the Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman. He offered an inspiring commentary on Genesis in the Interpretation Series. Much of what I offer this morning reflects their thoughts and I encourage you to seek out their work if you are intrigued by what you hear and want to learn more.

So, let's turn to the question of the day: How does God use our prayers to transform the world we know into the dream God intends for it?

In short, God does that through our cooperation. Prayer is a conversation in which we open ourselves to the energy, goodness and guidance God offers us in the real circumstances of our lives moment by moment. We pray when we respond to these promptings in accordance with God's purposes. In other words, prayer involves relationship and it involves partnership. It requires listening, and it requires action. It requires receptivity, and it requires responsibility.

That is because the purpose of prayer is transformation. When we pray, we are transformed, the world is transformed and even God is transformed – but more about that later.

Now to really appreciate the definition of prayer I'm offering this morning, we've got to spend a little time thinking about this God to whom we pray. Dr. Suchocki says that when we think of God and prayer we have three options:

1. We can operate from a notion of God that is too big. That is, we can believe in a God that is all-powerful, a God who knows all and has already willed everything that is to be. This God, if you will, is a divine egoist, a God who stands aside and waits until we are moved to pray, a God who must be asked to intervene. This God takes no initiative and lacks compassion.
2. The second option is to believe in a God who is too small. This God is like a genie in a bottle or a secretary who takes dictation from us and whom we command in prayer to do our bidding exactly as we ask.

Both of these images are caricatures, but they help to make a point. It's critically important to consider the nature of the God to whom we pray. Is the God to whom we pray a God whose dreams we welcome or not?

In a decidedly Anglican approach (for a Methodist) Suchocki offers us a middle way of thinking about God. She believes that we pray to a relational God, a God who shares power, a God who invites and persuades us to join in the work of creation. We pray, and our prayers become part of God's creative work in transforming the world's nightmare into a dream of love.

I want to point out that this view of God is different than some traditional views. It's different because it forsakes the claim that God is all-powerful. Instead of emphasizing God's power, it stresses God's desire to share power with us. This view respects our freedom while acknowledging that we have the power both to cooperate with God and to resist God. In this sense, then, we can limit God. Thus, this belief involves risk.

I think it's critically important to dwell on that point right now, because at this very moment we live in a world that is aching to make absolute power an idol. Many people in our time crave absolute power, power over goodness, over freedom and over others. They especially seek power over those who differ from them. This is the nightmare we have been witnessing and it is playing out all over the world, even in our politics.

In acknowledging that God chooses absolute love over power, we admit that there is risk in the world. In choosing love over power, we affirm that God honors the dignity of human freedom and calls us to live courageously. The most courageous prayer of all is the prayer of Jesus – “not my will but thine be done” – and it is in praying and then living this prayer that we begin to move toward God's dream of justice, hope and love.

We may think this middle way of thinking about God is altogether new, but today's story about Abraham suggests that it has ancient roots. A short while ago I hinted that our prayers may even change God. This is the point of our Genesis reading today.

This Genesis story is important because it brings together two completely different ways of thinking about God. This is just what I'm doing this morning in talking about an all-powerful God vs. a relational God. The Abraham story is comforting because it reminds us that faith in God has been seeking understanding for centuries by juxtaposing two ways of thinking.

Today we see the tension between two understandings played out in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Let me say at the outset that this is a story that has been distorted. It's been distorted because some Christians have used it in a moralistic condemnation of homosexuality. But Brueggeman, a far more sophisticated Biblical scholar than I, says that the overall trajectory of Scripture does not support this view. Instead, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah can be understood as a story about God's retribution. The description of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis suggests that these cities were places of outright rebellion against God. They were places of spiritual anarchy, God-forsaking cities of injustice, deceit, adultery, and human exploitation. Because of this, they deserved the most severe punishment possible under God's law. In fact, the entire story can be read as a lawsuit. The city has been indicted and it is awaiting judgment – the death penalty – the most extreme verdict that can be rendered. This legalistic framework is grounded in a theology of retribution. Evil must be punished. This is how the story was originally conceived, but our lesson this morning offers a different theology standing right alongside this stark theology of retribution: a theology of grace.

Grace comes in the form of a conversation, a prayer if you will, between Abraham and God. Abraham, who is a righteous man, criticizes God. He dares to ask God a risky question, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" Or as Brueggeman puts it, "Can a gracious God really destroy an entire city?" Abraham suggests that this action is unworthy of God. It undermines God's holiness. Were God to do this, God's reputation would suffer.

Friends, this is a powerful prayer. This is the prayer of a righteous man, a relational prayer, a prayer that challenges God's power of destruction. It is also a prayer that brings hope, for in rising to save a small number of the righteous, the story reveals that God values the righteous more than God desires the destruction of the wicked. And as Brueggeman reminds us, the story also hints at a new math – because of God's righteousness, even one innocent man may ultimately be able to save others and overtake the destructiveness of sin. According to the New Testament, Jesus is that man.

Who knows the extent to which our prayers, like Abraham's, might work together with God to transform our world from a nightmare to a dream? The story of Abraham and the entire witness of Scripture exhorts us, persuades us, to pray in words and deeds, so that we may cooperate with God in transforming our world's nightmare into a dream of love, a place where all

people may walk the streets without fear, where children will never go hungry, and where freedom will ring across every land and in every heart.

In such a world, God's world, we will no longer suffer the exhaustion of evil and grasping that is too much with us. Instead we will celebrate the dream of another poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who offers the hopeful image of a world renewed daily by God's Spirit of love, a world in which

[. . .] nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.