

“Lord, Do Not Be Angry When I Speak”

Moving Outward through *Radical Prayer*

Part 8 of the Sermon Series *Perspectives on Prayer*

Genesis 18:16-33; John 1:1-9

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Remember Ben Matlock? He was the Georgia bred, Harvard educated criminal defense attorney whose crime-busting skills were on display through our T.V. sets from 1986 to 1995. Although described in the press as “cantankerous and gruff” and often using “colorful language,” we knew better. We knew better because this fictional lawyer was one and the same person as the former and also fictional Sheriff Andy Taylor (you know, Opie’s dad!)

Both Matlock and Sheriff Taylor had a pulse because of the fine, trustworthy, wise and overall heart-warming acting of Andy Griffith. How cantankerous can a character really be considering the actor embodying him won a real-life Grammy Award for his 1993 Gospel CD entitled “I Love to Tell the Story”? Every episode, without fail, we knew Matlock and his team would redeem the innocent by revealing the real guilty party.

Andy Griffith, who originally attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a stepping stone to becoming a preacher, was quoted in a 1996 issue of Guideposts magazine as saying, “I firmly believe that in every situation, no matter how difficult, God extends grace greater than the hardship, and strength and peace of mind that can lead us to a place higher than where we were before.” We saw the spirit of this real-life, deeply personal conviction flowing through the made-up man Ben Matlock. No wonder America tuned in for 179 episodes. We needed and we trusted Matlock to make things right before the presence of the judge.

No matter how gruff Griffith and his script-writers attempted to make Matlock, we never once saw him before a judge acting the way ‘ol Abraham does in this morning’s lesson from the Book of Genesis. You may not hear it this way at first, but this passage of Scripture is one hundred percent courtroom drama. Consider Abraham as an attorney defending the righteous minority of the ancient, sinful city of Sodom. Sodom was about to be sentenced the maximum penalty. His “clients” were the ones who sought to love and serve the Lord while enmeshed in the city’s sacrilegious scene.

While destruction was perhaps a justifiable punishment for the purveyors of injustices, Abraham also knew of these many men, women and children striving to be good and faithful Israelites. This included members of Abraham's own family. On what possible, logical and faithful grounds, he wondered, would they too need to perish along with the unrepentant?

So Abraham approached God, Israel's supreme judge, who is depicted at the start of this chapter as quite ready to reign down a deathly devastating verdict. Appearing for the defense, Abraham proceeded "to raise very specific questions regarding God's preliminary decision." He was "blunt, persistent, and nontraditional. His questions pulled no punches; he got right to the point without preliminary niceties." This is no Andy Griffith using southern charm to win the case. If you doubt what I'm saying, just listen again to Genesis 18:24-25 –

"Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you!"

What tongue and finger wagging before God! This is much more a scene acted out by the late Lee J. Cobb in the 1957 movie "Twelve Angry Men." And after what surely seems to be a prideful chastisement of the Judge, Father Abraham then even had the gall to demand that the Judge not get angry with him for speaking so bluntly. That's like saying "excuse me" while I rather intentionally step on your toes!

Okay, so you be the judge for a moment. Here is your personally appointed ambassador to the people under your direct jurisdiction. He's radically getting in your face, posing a bold challenge to your wisdom and supreme authority. In the midst of a crisis reaching critical mass, he dares you to consider that you are about to judge unjustly. What is your response?

I think I would have had to call for some archangel bailiff to have Abraham removed from the court for contempt. Yet we don't read anything of this. In fact, God the Judge does not get angry, does not rebuff this radical talk. He instead invites Abraham into his private chamber to consider the points and possibly concede to alternatives. What we learn is that God not only called Abraham to service, but God also welcomed and trusted Abraham's bold leadership. And so, together, they debated the degree of effectiveness having righteous people in wicked cities has on the cause of salvation. Exactly how many people working for the Lord could save the city?

There is nothing in Genesis, chapter 18 to indicate that this whole courtroom drama occurred in the context of prayer. But conversing with God, and, yes, even debating with God, is certainly prayer! And we are engaged together in the next to last sermon on different prayer perspectives. It is therefore this view of the narrative that strikes me as most relevant to our lives today.

I would love to answer the big question about exactly how many people working with God it takes to redeem an unrighteous population. This, however, like all matters of divine judgment, remains a mystery. What I *can* say to this is that what Abraham teaches us through his encounter with God on behalf of Sodom's few and steadfast saints is what Richard Foster has called "radical prayer."

We've all had times when our hearts want to decry what we perceive as an unjust divine decisions. We've all demanded to know why the Lord allowed injustices among the human race and those caused by natural disasters to continue. But in such times, didn't we also feel somewhat guilty about it? Didn't we feel like it's not "our place" to challenge God?

Radical prayer encourages us to boldly speak up without fear of angering God and without feeling like any topic exists beyond the scope of our prayer life. Another name for this perspective on prayer is to call it *prophetic* prayer, for it dares to see and to claim holiness where others don't or just won't see it. This is the sort of prayer that theologian Walter Wink has described as "impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous ... more like haggling in an outdoor bazaar than the polite monologues of churches." This is the sort of prayer born of the kind of radical heart that knows that to be a blessing, a real difference maker with a divine destiny, you've got to speak up and get directly involved with situations of injustice.

Radical prayer reminds us that Jesus himself was a radical, a revolutionary raging against any and all man-made mechanisms well oiled with sin. Another great theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, therefore reminds us that "the Christian belongs not to the seclusion of cloistered life but in the thick of foes."

The big point is that it's okay to approach the Judge and speak your mind. Just as Abraham was not reprimanded, neither will you be. For we are all called to be God's ambassadors, to serve a sin-infected world with our strong cries and our bold actions on behalf of peace, love and justice. We are the couriers of Christ's court, and heralding his Gospel doesn't always sound pretty in our wounded world.

Jesus didn't leave Jerusalem, and the entire nation of Israel, and the whole

human race to perish. Neither will we. We will instead cry out when we feel forsaken. We will instead, with faith and without fear, prayerfully present our complaints about injustice on behalf of ourselves and our neighbors. The radical Word of loving truth and justice that was in the beginning will evermore be. God keeps raising up the likes of Abraham and John the Baptist, ambassadors of this truth who were also rather blunt about it. Like them, we need to train our hearts toward the revolutionary peace of God in Jesus Christ and hold it in tension with worldly injustice wherever we perceive and, especially, participate in it.

“The Church scattered,” Richard Foster concludes in his chapter on radical prayer, “must become the Church gathered.” Claiming our common, radical, prophetic heart ... the One that pulses to the power of the Holy Spirit ... the One that beats strongly in the Body of Christ ... is where this gathering really gathers ground. Amen.