

Sermon by the Rector
Sunday, July 25, 2010

[Genesis 18:20-32](#)

[Psalm 138](#)

Colossians 2:6-15

[Luke 11:1-13](#)

In today's passage from his Letter to the Colossians, Paul enjoins the members of this community not to allow themselves to fall under the sway of the "elemental spirits of the universe", which he equates with "philosophy", "empty deceit", and "human tradition".

These "elemental spirits" have hijacked the rite of circumcision, in Paul's view. Given to Abraham and his heirs as a sign of God's call and promise, it's become an element in a deal, a bargain, a quid pro quo arrangement between its human practitioners and God. We perform the ceremony; you make us special and protect us.

Maybe the spirit of the "deal" is the elemental spirit to which Paul refers. After all, quid pro quo arrangements, explicit and implicit, are pretty elemental. From the beginning we've relied on them to help us order our world and navigate its contradictions, challenges and complexities. Kids and parents, politicians and constituents, pastors and parishioners, businesses, their employees and customers: various kinds of "deals" define all these relationships, and many more. I do my homework during the week and get good grades; you, parents, let me go out with my friends on Saturday night. You vote for me, or donate money to my campaign, and I, your representative in government, look out for your interests. You pay your pledge, and I, the pastor, baptize and bury, preach and teach, visit and counsel. You, local business, offer something I want or need at a decent price, and I come to your store and buy it. I do an honest day's work and you, employer, give me a day's pay.

Elemental, indeed. How would we manage without this architecture of arrangements?

From one perspective, Abraham is a master of the deal. We can only admire the skill and savvy on display in his negotiations with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. A lot – so to speak - hangs on the outcome. Abraham's nephew Lot, the closest thing he has to a son or daughter at this juncture, lives in Sodom. With this interest foremost in his mind, he uses self-deprecation to draw the Almighty into an arrangement. "I – who am but dust and ashes; how do I even dare address You? – I, unworthy Abraham, will identify some innocent people – 50? 30? 10? - and You, Lord, will spare the city."

The apostles, at least those who made their living fishing on the Sea of Galilee, had to be adept at cutting deals. The various fishing enterprises on the lake had to divvy up the waters, staking out territories for each of them to harvest. Peter and Andrew, James and John, business partners, had probably worked out an arrangement for dividing up each day's catch. They negotiated with owners of markets to get their fish displayed and sold, and to set their cut of the sale price.

In today's gospel, though, they don't ask Jesus to teach them how to be better negotiators, though they might have. Rather, they ask him to teach them how to pray.

We turn to prayer when negotiation fails us. And it certainly does fail us. Inevitably, people fail to keep up their end of a bargain, and somebody gets hurt. What a vivid example of this we've seen recently. Shirley Sherrod's family had a long history of participation in the Civil Rights Movement. Her father was murdered by a white farmer who was never convicted of the crime. In the end, the federal government intervened to secure the rights for which so many struggled and some died. And with this intervention, a deal, partly implicit, was cut. People like Sherrod said, if I take advantage of opportunities now afforded me, I can trust that the federal government will have my back. They'll protect me from those who make me a target. What bitter disappointment, what an acute sense of betrayal, she must feel now – certainly with the man who shamefully made her a target, but even more with the federal officials who rushed to condemn her. Paraphrasing Colossians: a bond stands against the government of this first African-American President, with a list of unmet demands, failures to honor a deal held sacred by Shirley Sherrod and others.

Certain human experiences lie beyond the reach of deal-making: estrangement; failure; betrayal. Maybe the fishermen fell in one, or all, of these categories: estranged, even from one another? Failures, in their own eyes or those of kin and neighbors? Guilty of betrayal, in ways they were ashamed to admit?

We can't really bargain to overcome estrangement, or to redeem failure, or to cleanse and forgive betrayal. We'd like to; we feel more powerful when we can put something on the table, to be exchanged for what we need or want. But in the face of these challenges, we can only do what Jesus counsels the apostles to do: ask, seek, knock.

How to do this? By words, gestures and actions, whose virtue lies not in perfection but in persistence. We keep showing up – Woody Allen said it's 90% of the battle – at the place where we think reconciliation, redemption or forgiveness might just have a fighting chance. We offer up what we've got. It's not enough to form the basis of a bargain. No deals are, or can be, cut. We stand only on faith, that God will take our flawed but insistent efforts and, in God's time and way, bring forth fruit. We ask, we seek, we knock.

None of this obviates the power and authority of the “elemental spirits of the universe”, the deal-making impulse at the heart of the human enterprise. Many of us rejoice in President Obama's efforts to knock on various doors in the Arab and Muslim world, including Iran's. Somebody has to extend a hand – ask, seek. But we hope our President and his team also know how to cut deals that serve U.S. interests. Paul himself entered into “quid pro quo” arrangements. He asked – required, really – that the Christians in wealthy Mediterranean port cities send food to the famine-beset apostolic community in Jerusalem, in exchange for the spiritual riches the Jerusalem community had exported. And history knows no better deal-maker than Abraham.

But Abraham was praying for Sodom and Gomorrah as much as he was cutting a deal. Abraham knew the limits of deal-making; hadn't he offered up his wife to Pharaoh in exchange for safe passage through Egypt? Might he have regretted this betrayal? Could he have been looking for a way to make things right with Sarah? \

The righteous five Abraham offered to identify probably weren't the savvy negotiators. More likely, they were the persistent intercessors – the ones who continued to seek reconciliation, redemption and forgiveness even when their cities' iniquity had annihilated any possible basis for negotiation. With them, we travel to a level of human interaction with God that lies deeper than the one occupied by the “elemental spirits of the universe”. The fishermen and the other apostles have gone there too: “Lord, teach us to pray”, they ask, and they speak for all of us.