

Pentecost 8/proper 12 Genesis 18:20-33 Psalm 138 Colossians 2:6-15 Luke 11:1-13
St. Augustine's Freeland. July 28 2013 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

It's September of 1864. The Civil War's End Game is just about to begin. General Grant is stalled outside of Richmond. But General Sherman has just taken Atlanta in the very heartland of the Confederacy. Now Sherman contemplates a fateful decision - what to do with the city. Sherman has come to believe that only by bringing home the horrors of war to those civilians who've encouraged its prosecution will the this most bloody American conflict come to an end. Only when the South is completely demoralized will it surrender.

Such a course was doubly attractive: the devastation of the South was an appropriate and just punishment of those who dared threaten the Union, and the end of the conflict would be hastened.

So Sherman ordered all civilians out of Atlanta, with a clear thought to destroy the city. And such a howl went up from the South. Sherman was unmoved. In a reply to a letter of protest from Southern General John Bell Hood, he said: "War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it. And those who brought war into our country deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out."

But there were those in Atlanta who appealed to Sherman to allow them to stay on more than humanitarian grounds - rather they appealed to him based on their unwavering loyalty to the Union. One in particular said:

"At the breaking out of the war I owed large sums to Northern merchants, and I paid them. I had neither hand nor voice in bringing on this war. I wanted to live under the old flag. During the war I gave every assistance in my power to relieve Union prisoners, and my only son was caught aiding one of them to escape and shot. Then the rebels stripped me of my property and called me a damned Yank...."

If people like this who made valid and heart-wrenching requests - and there were surely more than a few - were allowed to stay it would be a tacit commitment on Sherman's part not burn Atlanta, even though it was a symbol of the rebellion. So what should he do? What if there were only ten just people such as this man in Atlanta? For the sake of the ten should he not destroy it?

And what about the Germans after the Second World War? The horrors perpetrated by the Nazis, especially in the Death Camps where millions and millions of innocent lives were exterminated cries out for justice. But what of the German people who were not engaged in this slaughter. Should all Germans be tarred with the same brush? What if there were only ten just people in Germany?

Questions of collective justice have been with us throughout human history. They continue to be with us, and they raise for all of us important ethical issues that, as people of faith,

we must examine and try to answer. These issues are not abstract. How we as a people act in the world is being judged by our world, and many find it wanting. The way that we answer, the way we are formed in our understanding of just and unjust actions, has an enormous impact on the way that we proceed as individuals, as a community of faith, as a denomination, and as a nation.

In the Old Testament reading Abraham is struggling with this same issue of collective responsibility and collective guilt, an issue made more powerful because behind this biblical story is a strong sense of community. It's an issue which turns out to be a lot more contemporary than at first glance. Orthodox Jewish belief said that if some members of a community were guilty of some transgression then all had to shoulder the responsibility. All family members bore the guilt if one was caught stealing. All members of a tribe shared responsibility if some transgressed the Law of Moses. All inhabitants of a city or province -such as Sodom and Gomorrah- were responsible for the actions of some, even if that some were just a few or were the majority. So really the question of the guilt of Sodom which Abraham addressed should have been a "no-brainer" for any Jew- they all were responsible. Ironically, thousands of years later, that's exactly the logic the Nazis used toward the Jews themselves, and the results were horrific.

But Abraham asks an unusual counter-question - and it's one which we continue to struggle with. What about the just? Can the integrity and the humanity of the just alter the fate of the guilty? Should our actions as individuals and as a community seek to differentiate between the guilty and the innocent? Should our actions toward the guilty be affected, altered, or suspended if the innocent suffer? ***What will determine God's judgement on Sodom: the guilt of the many, or the innocence of the few?***

Humanity still tries to answer that question, but we seem to be inconsistent in the way we do so. Sherman -who wasn't a religious man - probably wasn't aware of the parallel. In any case, he didn't see any issue. He made no exceptions- everyone was judged guilty and forced to leave. The man I mentioned, whose son was shot, went penniless to the North. And then Sherman burned Atlanta.

But in the second example, of Germany, things were different. After the Second World War the Allies not only instituted the Marshall Plan, rebuilt Germany and welcomed it back into the civilized world, but it welcomed also many of the scientists who developed "Weapons of Mass Destruction" with open arms, and put them to work, believing that good can come out of evil. Those scientists - among other things - took humanity to the moon.

So what does the story of Abraham and God talking in front of Sodom have to say to us as individuals and as Christians?

It says that even a very small number of righteous people are more important in God's eyes than the vast mass of the guilty, and God's justice for all is tempered by the fate of those righteous. And the reason is simple - ***the presence of that remnant of righteousness can transform the community.***

This is a constant theme in both Jewish and Christian theology - our faith affirms that the minority in a community can save the greater community. That's one of the more powerful messages of the cross, for instance, that, as Paul says, "by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." (Romans 5:19). Dietrich Bonhoeffer who died at the hands of the Nazis, wrote of Jesus:

"On the cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evil doers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life, but in the thick of foes. There is [our] commission, [our] work."
(Life Together)

When the righteous remain in a corrupt community they create the possibility of a new history, no matter how corrupt that community may be. And in fact that community cannot be reformed or renewed unless the Just are willing to identify themselves with the destiny of that community and challenge any unjust acts, any dishonesty, any evil.

That's why, in 1938, Dietrich Bonhoeffer - safe in New York - decided to return to Germany and found the Confessing Church. It's surely why, in the times of many nations' strife, the Christian Church is so strongly persecuted, because the ones who are most willing to speak out for justice and challenge the powerful have frequently come from within the ranks of the Church.

If we see an injustice, if we believe someone or some community is being mistreated through no fault of their own, if we believe that the truth is being denied or suppressed, then our faith places on us the obligation to speak out, to be persistent in seeking a just resolution. That's exactly what it means to be truly prophetic: to speak and act in a way that brings home the actual implications and consequences of their attitudes and actions to any who perpetrate injustice.

No community is ultimately beyond redemption. That's the centerpiece of Abraham's prophetic challenge. That's the pivotal message of the cross. And that's at the heart of the call to discipleship - our challenge is to be that community of disciples who stand up for the poor, who seek to transform the community of which we are a part - the human community - for justice, and mercy and goodness - for God. AMEN.