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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Genesis 18:20-32, Luke 11:1-13
Intercessory Prayer

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon about intercessory prayer -- about prayer for other folks. My main text is our First Lesson, Genesis 18. Let's begin with verse 32:

³²Then [Abraham] said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." (Genesis 18:32, RSV)

Abraham's question here is the pinnacle of his intercession for a town called Sodom. He has no particular reason to like this town. It is not his town. In fact, it is the *preferred* town, it is Miami, while he lives in Cleveland. It was as if his nephew, Lot, is the basketball player LeBron James: Lot gets to move to Miami, and Abraham is left in Cleveland.

You might recall the story about this. Abraham and his nephew Lot were born and raised in Mesopotamia, which is modern-day Iraq. In obedience to the LORD, Abraham had left Mesopotamia, bringing his family with him, and settled in the Promised Land. But the place where they initially settled wasn't big enough for both Abraham and his nephew Lot. You can read about this in Genesis 13. Disputes broke out between their herdsmen. So, Abraham suggested that he and Lot separate, and he gave Lot first choice of where to settle. Looking around, Lot saw the Jordan plain, which was well irrigated. In fact, it seems to have looked like the Garden of the Lord to the man, like Eden itself. So Lot chose that, the Jordan plain, pitching his tent in the outskirts of the town Sodom. Abraham and Lot then separated -- Lot to the big city and Abraham to the Oak of Mamre. You might recall that it was at the Oak of Mamre that Abraham and Sarah provided hospitality for the three holy visitors.

The matter of the three holy visitors happens to be part of the story of Sodom. It is part of the reason that that town was such an awful town. This morning's reading about Abraham's intercession for Sodom is found in Genesis Chapter 18. But earlier in the book, in Chapter 13, we find a general, dismal evaluation of Sodom:

¹³Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD. (Genesis 13:13, NRSV)

As it turns out, the town confirms its bad reputation by attempting violence against two of the three holy guests hosted by Abraham. Imagine that! Three holy

visitors come to earth, and Sodom tries to violate two of them! That happens in the next chapter after our text, in Genesis 19. There we read that Abraham accompanies the three holy visitors as they walk toward Sodom. At the outskirts of the town, the LORD lingers with Abraham and the other two go on to the town, where Lot gives them shelter. And he *needs* to give them shelter, to the extent of shutting the door against the men of the town who try to break down the door because they want to abuse the two holy visitors.

So, that is just about to happen. But in our text, Genesis 18, prior to this commotion and chaos and hunger for sin in Sodom, Abraham prays for the town. Abraham asks that a few upright persons might win pardon for the many wicked, and at each stage of his intercession, the Lord answers yes. Abraham wins safety for the town all the way to ten. If there are ten righteous people in that town, the Lord will spare it.

Let us pause to ponder that a bit, trying to take stock of the importance of the saints. When we celebrate baptisms here at Immanuel, we place a few grains of salt on the tongue of the one being baptized and we give a lighted candle, along with the words of Christ to his disciples:

¹³“You are the salt of the earth... ¹⁴You are the light of the world...”
(Matthew 5:13-14, RSV)

I figure that this means that if someone like Abraham is praying for our city, and the Lord promises to spare the city for the sake of ten righteous persons in it, then you and I should be aiming to help make up those ten. Judging by the Lord’s consent to Abraham’s intercessions, the Lord *wants* to spare the city. So, pray for our city. And be good *within* our city that the Lord looking on will find some righteous persons among us.

An interesting thing about Abraham’s intercession for Sodom is that he stops at *ten* righteous persons. Suppose he had pressed on. Suppose he had interceded on behalf of Sodom all the way down to one person. Do you think that the Lord would have spared Sodom for the sake of one righteous person? I sure hope so! Because you and I are depending on that one righteous Person.

Israel herself came to hope that the mercy of the Lord was so generous that even for the sake of one righteous person, the Lord would spare the city. The problem is that the prophets began to worry whether the city contained even one. Jeremiah, for example, is willing to run “to and fro” in Jerusalem in search of one good person, but he is not sure he will find one:

¹Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note!
Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice
and seeks truth; that I may pardon her. (Jeremiah 5:1, RSV)

Same with the prophet Ezekiel: he also yearns for one righteous person, but, alas, he has to report that the Lord is unable to find that one:

²⁹The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. ³⁰And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. (Ezekiel 22:29-30, NRSV)

But now comes good news: The Lord permits the prophet Isaiah to foresee that one person shall indeed come on the scene, one person shall arise for whom the Lord will be willing to spare the people. But it will not be easy. Thus we hear about the Suffering Servant:

³He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:3-6, KJV)

The Church believes that we know this One. He is our Lord Jesus Christ. He is both our Great Intercessor, who prays for our world continually, and the One Righteous Person, for whose sake, the triune God is willing to save our world.

But what of us and our life of prayer, humble Christians that we might be? Can we intercede for others as Abraham did? Are our intercessory prayers *that* important, that they can help keep the world alive?

Let me read a passage for you from one of the most uplifting, but also heartrending books I have read in a long time. It is a book called *Darkness Is My Only Companion*¹. If you have attended our Maundy Thursday liturgy, you will recognize the title of this book. It is the closing verse of Psalm 88 during the Stripping of the Altar. As that verse is read aloud, the final lights are turned off in the church and the congregation leaves in silence and in darkness, in sorrow at the suffering ahead for Jesus. The book is written by an Episcopal priest up in New England named Kathryn Greene-McCreight². She writes a very moving theological commentary on her own mental illness, for she suffers from bi-polar disorder. She has been hospitalized five times and has undergone two courses of

¹ Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2006)

² She has a Ph.D. from Yale University, serves as assistant priest at St. John's Episcopal Church and teaches at Albertus Magnus College, both in New Haven, Connecticut.

electroconvulsive therapy for depression. She lives seeking a frightening balance between depression and mania. One thing I have concluded from this book is that I should not suppose that I know much about depression. The occasional times of sadness that many folks feel is quite different from major depression.

She writes this about prayer:

One very important way to help your friends who suffer from mental illness is to pray for them. The assurance that people were praying for me, since I had so much trouble praying for myself, was a salve. My true friends during this time were the ones I knew were praying for me. It can be very difficult to pray for someone day in and day out, over and over again, especially when you see little improvement, when you feel like a scratched CD uttering the same phrases over and over, like the woman who pounded and pounded on the door of the judge: “Grant me justice against my opponent” (Luke 18:3). Even so, this was so vital for me. I do not mean to say that the *idea* of people praying for me was a great comfort, although I do suppose this is true to an extent. I mean the *fact* that people were praying for me was key in my dealing with my illness. In other words, it is not just that I was touched that people would think of me. Prayer is more than merely thinking of someone, even though it does involve thought. My point here is that I believe in the efficacy of prayer, in God’s pleasure at hearing our desires and needs and providing for that which we seek in prayer. That many people were knocking on God’s door for me strengthened me in putting up with the disease and sped the healing, even though the full healing was years in coming. Maybe it would never have come if people had not been praying. (*Darkness Is My Only Companion*, page 35)

The prayers of Abraham for Sodom gave that town a chance. They did not even know that someone was praying for them. They simply continued in their wickedness, not even guessing that Abraham was standing outside the city praying for them. They never understood that someone was fighting for their lives. His prayers interposed like an iron wall between them and destruction, all the way down to ten persons. Intercessory prayer did this good thing.

Now, there might be someone on your heart for prayer. Then pray for that one. He need not be a saint, she need not be extraordinary in any sense. Indeed, that one on your heart might be quite confused and caught up in sin. But Abraham prayed for the sinful town of Sodom, and the Lord honored his intercession down to ten persons.

And for you and me, the matter is even better. The Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, stands ready to fulfill your prayer for the sake of one righteous Person. He is our Lord Jesus. Your prayers are never futile. They avail much. Indeed, Jesus himself speaks with authority about the power of prayer. He makes no delicate promise when speaking of prayer. His words about prayer are not

nuanced, as if trying to build in all kinds of conditions. No, Jesus knows what he is talking about when he speaks of prayer, and this is what he says to us:

⁹And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10, RSV)

Sometimes, the one for whom you are praying regains enough strength and peace that you can see the difference. The person might even be able to thank you, as Kathryn Green-McCreight is able to thank those who pray so faithfully for her.

But even if we do not see the granting of our prayer in this earthly life, at least we will not find ourselves on Judgment Day having to say, "I never prayed much for that one. I worried an awful lot, but I did not pray." Oh! May the reverse be so: May it so work out that *someday*, even on the far side of death if need be, we will see the one we prayed for at last healed and in his right mind, in her right mind. Then we will be able to say, "I am glad I prayed so faithfully for that one, for now I see that what Jesus promised is true. I sought and I found, I knocked and it was opened to me. I asked and I received," through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.