

Be Careful What You Pray For
Genesis 13:1-18, Matthew 7:13-14
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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Ok, I'm going to let you in on a little secret strategy that has paid big dividends for me for more years than I care to recall. You need to know that I'm risking something here by telling you this, and in fact I'm only letting you in on my plan for two reasons: first, because it will help illustrate the point of the sermon fairly well, and secondly, because enough of you forget what I say in the sermons to guarantee its effectiveness for years to come.

You know the situation well. You're sitting around with family or friends near the end of a delicious meal. Folks are talking and relaxing, and there's one left on the plate. One what? It doesn't matter. One piece of pie, one piece of chicken, one oyster in the stew. You know most of the folks in the group probably don't want it, but you do. But because this is a group that values politeness and a group that cares about what other people think, you can't just take it – that would be “rude”. You don't want to make a pig out of yourself, you just want seconds (or thirds). What to do, what to do? Here's where my little strategy has paid off big-time for me.

Simply take the plate holding the object in question and turn to the person seated near you who is *most likely* to want the food for themselves. Then, in a public speaking sort of way, say, “Hey, Marty, what do you say? Can you choke down another piece of pie?” or something similar. All eyes turn to Marty. If you're lucky, Marty's wife or mother gives him a “what are you, crazy?” glare. If Marty knows what's good for him, he meekly takes the plate and passes it on. Well, the person next to Marty isn't going to be caught dead eating the last piece of pie. Slowly, all the eyes in the room focus on this lone piece of pie, making its inexorable journey around the table. Every now and then someone will reach out and take the plate from a husband or son who looks tempted. Finally, eight times out of ten, the pie comes back to you. At that point you can say, very helpfully, “You know, it's just one piece. Not even worth saving, really.” And then slide it onto your plate and enjoy! Try it sometime – you'll thank me later.

So why bring that up here? Because it's a great illustration of a concept with which we're all familiar, and on which too many of us base our lives: the concept of scarcity. All the economic systems of the world are based on the ideology of scarcity: communism, capitalism, it doesn't matter – all of us are trained to see the world through the lenses of scarcity. We believe – we *know* – that there is not enough to go around, and so we need to figure out a way to get what we want. Now. If there were six pieces of chicken left on the plate, you'd just take one and be done with it. But if there's only one, and we all want it, who ends up with it? You see? Scarcity. We know the ideology of scarcity.

Our reading this morning from Genesis points us towards an example of scarcity and its implications. Abram and his wife, Sarai, and his nephew, Lot, had been in Egypt where some rather unusual things had gone on (more about that in a moment). They are called from Egypt northwards – back to the land that had been promised to Abram and Sarai and their descendants. And as they show up near Bethel, the drama of scarcity plays itself out before our eyes.

Abram and Lot have each done pretty well for themselves in recent years. They've got sizeable herds and more than a few employees. It turns out that the “promised land” doesn't have enough water or grass to keep everyone happy. Tempers are short. Conflict erupts. And here we see, according to theologian Walter Brueggeman, the tension between the ideology of scarcity and

the power of the promise.¹ God has already promised this land to Abram and his descendants. Abram could say, “Well, Lot, it was good to be with you. Good luck with the herds and everything – I guess you’ll be needing to make your own way in the world now, so I can save all of these resources for my descendants...”

But you know that’s not what happens! Instead, Abram opens up the land to Lot. “Go ahead, son, you choose.” How can he do that? Because Abram has a trust in the promise that trumps his fear of scarcity. As a septuagenarian (someone in his 70’s) who is depending on God to make a great nation out of his unborn children, Abram is saying to Lot, “Look, it doesn’t matter. If God can keep the promise of a great nation out of my withered old body, then he can do it on any land. Just pick, and let’s not fight.”

That attitude from Abram brought a question to my mind: where did he learn to believe like that? How did he trust so completely? That’s where chapter 12 and his little visit to Egypt come in. Right after God promises the land to Abram in the passage last week, Abram and Sarai experience famine. Turns out the “promised land”, at least on first glance, wasn’t everything that Abram and Sarai thought it might be. So they leave the land, and, facing a scarcity of food and a time of insecurity, they come into Egypt. And there, in that climate of worry and doubt and fear, Abram responds by lying to Pharaoh. Pharaoh has a crush on Sarai, and Abram doesn’t do anything to discourage it. “Did I say she was my wife? Ohhhh, must have been a mistranslation...She’s my sister. My sister.” Fortunately for everyone, God intervenes in a remarkable way, but the lesson is learned. Even when Abram was careless with the promise (after all, how was Abram going to come by all these descendants apart from his wife?), God remains faithful. God’s promises do not depend on human situations – God is not a believer in the ideology of scarcity and God reunites Abram and Sarai and sends them back to the land he’s pledged to give to them and their children.

And, as you read, the result of Abram’s faith, trust, and generosity is that, as Frederick Buechner puts it, “Lot took over the rich bottom-land and Abram was left with the scrub country around Dead Man’s Gulch.”²

But that’s not all he’s left with. There in the desert of Canaan, God renews the promise. And whereas in our reading from chapter twelve last week, God mentioned “offspring” or “seed” only once, here we see that word three times in verses 15 and 16. Abram’s children will be countless, God says. And then God calls Abram to get up and take a survey of the land; Abram builds altars to worship the Lord and continues to live in tents.

It’s interesting to note, too, what didn’t happen. When Abram gave Lot the good land, there wasn’t any great declaration of gratitude on Lot’s part. The children that God promised didn’t come immediately. There was no mass outcry from the local population for Abram to come and live with them. Abram and Sarai were not given the “keys to the city” anyplace in this promised land. Abram was, in the eyes of the world around him, pretty irrelevant and insignificant. Just a crazy, lonely old guy who trusted God and obeyed him. That’s how Genesis 13 ends.

So what is the word for us today? Where is the call of God in our lives from this passage? Allow me to suggest that this scripture invites us to explore the areas in our lives where there is a conflict between what is easy and what is right; between what is convenient and what is just; between what is good and what is best.

¹ *Interpretation Commentary on Genesis* (John Knox, 1982), p. 131.

² Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (Harper & Row, 1979) p. 4

Think, for instance, about the fact that your W-2 forms are coming in this month. You're getting ready to pay your taxes. Can you fudge the numbers a little bit? Probably. Should you – even if you really need the money?

Think about the ways that you treat your mother, your spouse, or your supervisor. There are a lot of times when it's really easy to say the harsh word. There are times when it's easy to roll your eyes and walk away...but could it be that the right thing to do in that situation would be to have a meaningful and respectful conversation?

A number of you in this room are preparing to graduate from college or high school this spring. What's next in your lives? You have a lot of options open to you. Have you prayed about it? Some of what lies before you is incredibly easy. Some may look easy, but carries a hidden price tag. What is the best place for you?

And if that's too grandiose for you, think about tomorrow. Many of you will have time off because it's Martin Luther King, Jr., day. So what? Is that just a vacation day? Another chance to get caught up on "Days of Our Lives" or to get to the Mall? Maybe you can use the day to learn something about Martin and the ways his faith compelled him to speak and act. Better yet, you could take a couple of hours and invest it in exploring and fighting the prevalence of racism, violence, and poverty in the world – a fight that cost Martin his life.

Abram's nephew Lot saw the easy money and he took it. I probably would have done the same thing.

Abram remembered the promise and lived it – even when it didn't look all that strong at some points. He depended on God in the gray areas of his life, and he did not let his fears dictate his actions.

As you look at these areas of your life – your economic situation, your education, your relationships, the call to be an advocate for the voiceless...How do you pray? Are your prayers based on the presupposition of scarcity in which we've all been trained? Have you accepted as fact the notion that God can't possibly be interested in keeping his promises of justice and love, so you're better off simply looking out for yourself?

Or can you, like Abram, remember that you are a people of promise. God promised Abram that through him, the world would be blessed. God is calling you to be a part of the answer to that prayer – God is calling you to be a blessing in the life of someone else today. Can you pray for a heart like that? Amen.