



“THE BIG ASK”
SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 18: 20-32; LUKE 11: 1-13
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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If you ever start to doubt the capacity of human beings to sink to new lows of hostility and depravity, go to a football game. And if you really want to take a good look into the pit of how low every day people can sink when things are not going their way, go to a football game when you're married to the Offensive Coordinator.

I have been through difficult things in my life, but nothing has threatened to steal my faith in humanity like our twenty-six years in big-time football.

It didn't matter if we were winning or losing, there were always angry people—about the point spread, about their fantasy football stats. In fact some of our best, most winning and exciting seasons were some of the worst for fan hostility.

This toxic spewing of anger and hostility was taking its toll on me. I didn't want to become one of “them” but I realized that capacity was in me—just like it was in them. It was going to take intentional work for me to continue to be a loving person.

A common strategy for relating to hostile fans for coaches wives is to write them off as “idiots” or “jerks.” I tried these coping skills on for size a time or two. I also tried humanizing fans by “correcting” their misperceptions in a friendly voice. These overtures were not only unsuccessful but they often backfired. They just yelled at me more.

I needed a way to respond that was categorically different, for a way to connect with these people as human beings.

I finally found a strategy that has had an almost 100% success rate. The BIG ASK!

I began writing back angry fan emails with the opposite of hostility, the opposite of correction; I answered them by asking them to tell me more about who they are. I first acknowledged how much they must care about their football team. And then I asked them to tell me more about how long they have loved their team, what they love the most about it.

There are several honorary members of the John Shoop fan club who came into the fold because I learned how to respond instead of react.

It was a way for me to maintain my sanity, my humanity.

But the BIG ASK is not just about humanity and sanity—it is about mercy and grace.

Abraham is not mincing words with God.

How forgiving are you for the sake of the righteous, Abraham asks God, and exactly what is it I am supposed to communicate to these people?

Abraham's questions are very direct, even confrontational. "Far be it from you, God, not to be forgiving." "Surely, you God of justice, are going to do what is just."

Abraham isn't afraid of the BIG ASK—so, what's the bottom line, God. What are you really made of, God? Mercy or hypocrisy?

In order to receive the teaching that S and G has for us we must first let go of the mythology that has been handed down to us about these distorted cities. The core myth of S and G that we need to let go of is that they bear a message about God's condemnation of certain kinds of sexuality, more specifically about God's condemnation of homosexuality. In fact, the church was about ten centuries old when S and G first was appropriated as a story about sexuality.

In the 39 times S and G is mentioned in scripture, only one (Genesis 19) has any reference to sexuality. And many, many scholars believe this passage is condemning brutality to strangers and sexual aggression, not homosexuality.

The sins of S and G are the sins of arrogance, pridefulness, ingratitude, and brutality to strangers. They had everything they needed and they felt entitled to ignore the needs of others.

Legend has it that S and G became supersaturated with worldly goods and material things became their idols. So much so that tales of S and G tell of acts of altruism among their citizens being punished by death. They even hoarded mercy. The Prophets paint a picture of S and G as a place where they had a brazen disregard for those in poverty, those in crisis. And they hated outsiders.

Sodom and Gomorrah's story is a story of having too much and of just how dangerous it is when we live like we can never have enough. Theirs is a story of violent grasping for more and more, and a brutal reactivity to those who challenged, threatened, or interrupted their way of life.

And Abraham wanted to know how much mercy God would extend in such a distorted context for the sake of the righteous who had kept their hearts in tact. Abraham isn't afraid of the BIG ASK—and either is God.

Many of us may not like the sound of the norms of friendship that were expected in Jesus' time that are articulated in Luke's Gospel.

Friends held everything in common. The code of honor dictated that a friend get up in the night to help another. Far from heroic, far from extraordinary, this act of sharing was to be expected. Jesus' point is how much more will God do if this is the very bare minimum that a friend is required to do.

Friendship's generosity is a simple ask, not the BIG ASK—knock and the door will be opened, seek and you will find, ask it is shall be given to you.

The BIG ASK is much more complicated, much more fraught.

Jesus tells this story after the disciples asked him how to pray—how do we connect to God? How do we ask for what we need?

Jesus says we connect with God like a parent, someone who is supposed to know you, care about you, protect you, help you grow and flourish. Jesus said we approach God like a provider, someone who knows what you need and wants you to have what you need. And Jesus says we approach God like a true friend, someone who you can trust not to lead you into harms way.

Asking for mercy; responding with mercy—these can be the hardest things to do in a world that has valorized individualism, accumulation, and disdain toward those in need.

MERCY is the biggest ask, the hardest.

And it is the prayer I pray every day—an ancient prayer for mercy “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

What does it mean to truly ask and receive God's mercy and God's grace? It means this mercy and grace become a part of who we are in the world, who we are to ourselves, and who we are to everything that lives and breathes and calls this planet home.

When we hear “Black lives matter,” that plea from people of color deserves mercy and grace. They are calling out for us to see how they haven't mattered the same. They are calling for our country and the whole world to commit to a promise that they should matter the same.

When we hear “Blue lives matter,” that reaction from police merits mercy and grace. Whether from frustration, from fear, from a feeling of being underappreciated,

underpaid, or even under attack, they are calling out us to see the complexity of their lives.

Christians are called to hear the cries of injustice from people of color and to have the courage to ask them to tell us more. And Christians are called to pay attention to the exasperation of many in the police force with the courage to ask to hear more.

The BIG ASK is BIG enough to go into the hardest, most painful, most distorted places and make space for mercy and grace. The BIG ASK is big enough to look underneath grief, anger, and even hostility and believe a human being who needs mercy and grace is there seeking connection with a bigger world.

Think of the hardest places to take this mercy. That is where the BIG ASK really hits its stride.

Maybe its Trump supporters for you—the angry, the tired, the suspicious, those who feel their world is slipping out from under them. They feel they have been sold a bill of goods all these years.

Maybe its Hilary supporters for you—people still willing to get behind a career politician or support someone you feel is not honest.

Where ever and however your buttons get pushed, that is where God is inviting you to find the courage to ASK the hardest questions to ask—not how can you possibly feel the way you do, but tell me more about what is at stake for you, tell me more about what really matters to you.

When we try to erase the experiences of others with statements like “All lives matter,” we’re not extending mercy. We are reacting, not responding. We are running the risk of telling people we know better about their lives than they do.

Long before black lives matter and blue lives matter and all lives matter were the litmus test for whose side you are on, there was a movement afoot by healers, social theorists, and embodiment theologians like me to say “bodies matter.”

As the “matter” language has become prominent and tender with the feelings of so many, many of us has backed off this “bodies matter” language. But I believe this is not a commitment that Christians can let go of. We are an INCARNATIONAL people. Every single body matters and so we must honor, acknowledge, and heal bodies when they are harmed, brutalized, misunderstood, marked, dismissed, or demonized.

When it comes to mercy and grace there are healing opportunities in the dissonance in our world, in the grief of those who want to know they matter. How can we help to create the conditions necessary to make the BIG ASK possible, constructive, healing?

The story sounds like a fanciful tale. A mythical imaginary that you may have heard somewhere before or that you just wish were true.

But this is a true story, this story about a man named Larry.¹

Larry grew up in Nebraska, the son of a man who liked harassing black people for his leisure activity on the weekends. Larry's father taught him the lessons of disdain for difference. He taught him to be always suspicious of Jews and what they are trying to take from you. His father taught him how to harass, how to be menacing, how to make others afraid of you.

And Larry learned to admire icons of racialized hatred—Adolf Hitler decorated the walls of his apartment. He became the Grand Dragon of the KKK and the head of the American Nazi Party in Nebraska.

Larry's days were often taken up with threatening phone calls to Jews and people of color in Lincoln.

Michael and Julie Weiser moved to Lincoln with their family in search of a quiet life. Devoted Jews, the Weisers were quickly targeted by Larry, who began harassing them on the phone. "You'll be sorry you every moved here, Jew boy," Larry told Michael the first time Michael answered one of Larry's calls. Larry sent packages saying things like the "KKK is watching you."

Michael and Julie were deeply disturbed by Larry's harassment, but it was their faith in a merciful God that guided them, not their fear of someone who had so clearly positioned himself as their enemy.

After the harassment went on for a while, Michael decided to start calling Larry himself. Instead of meeting his hostility with more hostility, Michael started leaving kind messages on Larry's voicemail. After several friendly messages on his answering machine, Larry picked up the phone the next time Michael called.

"Stop calling me," Larry said. Larry was angry. He wanted Michael's calls to stop.

Before he could hang up, Michael was able to say, "I know you are disabled, can I give you a ride to the grocery store?"

Extended silence. "No, but thank you for asking." Larry said before he hung up.

¹ This amazing story is narrated in more detail in Gregory Knox Jones' [Play the Ball Where the Monkey Drops It](#). Since I read the story in Jones' book, I have found it in other print media sources as well through the years.

After several weeks, Larry called Michael and Julie and gave them the BIG ASK—can we talk? Would you be willing to talk to me, someone who has treated you with such hostility and hatred?

The Weisers said they would be right over.

After four hours of truth telling to the Weisers about his hate-filled life, his past of angry harassment, and his loneliness, Larry took off his swastika rings and gave them to Michael and Julie. “I don’t want these anymore.”

From there, Larry, Michael, and Julie built a potent friendship. Larry converted to Judaism, he officially apologized to the Jewish and black communities in Lincoln, and sought out ways to encourage others who were in the grip of racism to find the freedom of letting go of their hatred and fear.

When Larry’s life was ending because of a long illness, the Weiser’s invited him into their home and Julie quit her job to care for him in his last days. When Larry died, Michael was the cantor at his funeral.

Larry died a man transformed by MERCY—because someone was courageous enough to respond to him with the BIG ASK—would you be willing to receive mercy, love, and grace from me?

Thanks be to God.