

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 2019  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael Renninger

Monty Hall would walk up to a contestant and say, “I’ll give you \$50 if you have an egg in your purse.” Or he’d say, “I’ll give you \$100 if you have a hammer in your pocket.”

Prize-winning contestants ultimately had to make a choice. Do you keep your prize, or do you take the ‘mystery prize’ behind curtain number two? Sometimes that was a better prize. Sometimes you got a year’s supply of ear wax.

Do you know the name of the show?

“Let’s Make a Deal!”

That’s a great name for a game show.

But there have been times in my life when I’ve thought that God is like a divine Monty Hall. There are times when I pray to God, and it becomes a game of “Let’s make a deal.”

For instance, when I was in school, I’d pray: “Lord, I didn’t study for this test. So, if you help me to get a good grade, I will never hit my brother again. Do we have a deal, God?”

(By the way – that prayer never worked!)

When I crashed my dad’s truck into a parked car, I prayed that my dad wouldn’t be mad. I bargained with God. But my dad was still mad. God hadn’t taken the deal.

When my mom was diagnosed with cancer, I stormed heaven with offers. “Just heal her, and I’ll be a better priest. Just keep her alive, and I will stop picking on people from New Jersey.”

But... God does not make deals.

You may be surprised to hear me say that, because in today’s first reading it *sounds* like Abraham is negotiating with God. In fact, it sounds like Abraham *beats* God in the deal!

Abraham’s first offer to God is this – “if I can find 50 righteous people in Sodom, would you spare them?” And God say ‘yes.’

Abraham keeps negotiation. “God, would you take the deal if I can only find 40 righteous people?” God agrees.

By the end of the conversation, Abraham says to God, “How about if I can only find ten righteous people? Would you spare everyone?” Quite a negotiation!

Abraham’s conversation with God sounds like so many of my prayers over the years. Perhaps you’ve prayed this way too?

Does God make deals?

The great saints tell us that prayer is *a conversation with God*. So as we listen to the first reading, I think we’re actually hearing a prayer between Abraham and God.

Many of us make a mistake when we think about prayer: We think that the purpose of prayer is to *change God’s mind*, to get God to act in a certain way. With that in mind, we may think that Abraham is negotiating, trying to change the mind of a deal-making God.

But I think it’s the other way around. The purpose of prayer is NOT to change God. ***The purpose of prayer is to change us, by helping us to experience and know God better.***

In today’s first reading, someone IS being changed. *Abraham* is being changed. What does Abraham learn in today’s first reading?

Well, in Abraham’s day, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were known to be terribly sinful cities. They are like the Las Vegas of their day. Different Old Testament prophets describe the sin differently: some say it was sexual immorality, others say it was a violation of hospitality, others say it was a lack of justice.

So at first, Abraham thinks that God plans to destroy the whole city.

Let’s not rush past that thought. In every century, there are human beings who would be perfectly happy with that deal - happy if God would destroy and wipe out THOSE PEOPLE who are sinners. Notice, it’s always *those* people... the folks we’ve judged to be horribly horrible.

But Abraham is learning something in this prayerful conversation. God seems perfectly willing to spare the WHOLE city if Abraham can find 50 righteous people there. Did you hear that? God’ doesn’t say – I will spare the 50 nice people and then destroy the rest. No. God says, I will spare everyone, including the sinners, for the sake of the righteous.

God is teaching Abraham a challenging truth. Many ‘people of faith’ think that the only goal of

their life is to live according to God's commandments (to be 'righteous') so that *they themselves* can be saved. And if my neighbors are sinners? Well, that's *their* problem. I'll go to heaven... they'll go to New Jersey! Notice the result – I am saved, they are destroyed.

But as Abraham prays, he learns something amazing about God. God says that he will spare EVERYONE in the city for the sake of the 50 righteous folks. Yes, even the sinners get spared, not destroyed.

Apparently, God's mercy is not given *only* to the righteous. Even the imperfect get saved.

Apparently, good people are a blessing to their neighbors, even if they aren't aware of that fact!

As Abraham continues to pray, he also discovers that God is not one who judges according to *quantity*. In our world, many people judge their value based on *counting*: counting how many dollars I have, how many cars I own or promotions I've had. *I'm important because of the numbers.*

But numbers don't seem to be important to God. He will spare the city for 50 righteous people... or 40... or 30... or ten.

The Book of Genesis seems to be telling us that whole communities have been saved by the presence of just a few folks who strive to do things God's way. Which makes me ask: is it possible that God wants to work *through me* to save my community? Does God want you to be that person whose goodness makes a difference in your neighborhood?

Abraham was not playing "Let's make a Deal" with God. God was teaching Abraham – and us – profound lessons about divine love, mercy and patience.

And those lessons are challenging today. In our political culture, many of us are playing a game called "Let's Destroy Them." We condemn the person we've judged to be wrong, we declare that they're a sinner, and our goal becomes simple: "they must be destroyed."

So we find people saying, "President Trump is an immoral, criminal sinner. He must be destroyed. And all his deplorable supporters too." And others say, "Pelosi and Schumer are ruining the republic. They must be destroyed, and all their followers too."

But God seems to be more in the redemption business than the destruction business. It's almost an act of political treason these days to suggest that there are righteous people in both parties! So, whatever party I support, perhaps God is asking me to be a righteous person *there*, a saving blessing to others.

Abraham learns that God is willing to be merciful in ways that are surprising. God is willing to pay attention to those who might otherwise be overlooked. Isn't that part of being righteous... being willing to pay merciful attention to those who are overlooked?

To be a righteous person today might mean that I pay attention to the unborn child in the womb, and the newborn child at the border.

To be righteous today means to take care of those who are victims of crimes, and to minister to those who commit crimes.

To be righteous means to feed the hungry, and also to make helpful connections for those who need work.

To be righteous means to work to end violence, and to challenge every person to that change of heart which leads away from sinful anger, to Christ-like peace.

God told Abraham that he was willing to spare the cities because of just a few righteous people. As we keep reading the Bible we discover that God was willing to spare *the whole world* because of *one* righteous person.... Jesus Christ.

Jesus was the one who revealed God's kingdom. And the God who spoke with Abraham ultimately looked at the whole world and said, "Because of this one righteous person - because of Jesus - I will spare all of you. I will forgive all of you. I will have mercy on every one of you.

"You are all sinners in some way, but through this One, who loved perfectly, I will perfectly love all of you, no matter where you live, or how you sin."

So pray... and listen. Pray as Jesus taught us. You might be surprised by what you learn about yourself, and learn about the Lord.