

ONE GOOD APPLE
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First Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 18:20-33
Romans 5:12-21

A few years ago I was doing a stint as a counselor at one of our Presbyterian church camps. The campers were Senior High young people, and among them was a young lady who was the sort of person that every camp counselor fears. Every time we suggested something, she would start to complain: Let's go star gazing—I'll get bit by bugs. Time to go swimming—I don't want to get my hair wet. Time for Bible study—Boring! Of course, her complaints were contagious. When others heard her fussing, they also took up the chant: "We don't want to."

That went on for about three days, until the Lord, in divine wisdom, smote this young lady with a case of poison ivy. She had it from head to toe. Nothing would do but for her to call mommy and daddy, who dutifully and probably regretfully drove out from the big city to take her home. I still remember the sense of relief I felt as I watched the taillights of her car driving away from the camp.

Instantly, the mood of the camp changed. It was like going from a bumpy road to a smooth highway. Campers' attitudes were completely transformed. Instead of complaining, they willingly entered into the spirit of the camp. They even helped cook that awful camper stew over the open fire which seems to be an obligatory ordeal of every camp experience. It was like going from Metallica to Mozart.

One person's attitude had affected the entire group. It was a near perfect illustration of the old adage: One bad apple spoils the bunch. We know how it is true.

Is it possible, though, that the reverse can also be true? Can one good apple improve the bunch? It's probably not true that if you take one good apple and put it in a basket with a bunch of rotten ones, that all the others will suddenly be good. But can it work with people? Can one good person, or one small group, make a difference in a world of evil?

That is the debate that Abraham has with God as they stand on the heights of Hebron overlooking the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Those two notorious cities have become synonymous with immorality. But Sodom and Gomorrah were not just failures in morality; they were dens of injustice. People were being mistreated there; abused; exploited.

So the Lord and Abraham stand overlooking the cities. They have a conversation that sounds like the haggling in a Middle Eastern market. Abraham deferentially approaches God: “Lord, if there are fifty righteous people in the city, will you spare the city? Lord, you are the judge of all the earth; you cannot destroy those who are righteous. So how about fifty?” The Lord replies: “For the sake of fifty righteous, I will not destroy the city.”

Abraham comes again: “Lord, suppose five of those fifty fall away. You wouldn’t destroy the city for lack of five righteous, would you?” And the Lord replies: “For forty-five righteous, I will preserve the city.”

“Lord,” says Abraham, “I’m just dust and ashes and don’t have a right to speak. But suppose only thirty righteous can be found.” “Fine,” says the Lord. “Twenty.” “OK.” “Ten, Lord, ten righteous.” “For ten righteous I will not destroy the city.”

We have to understand how merciful is God’s response. Ten righteous ones offset an entire city of wrongdoers. A pinch of goodness sweetens a whole pot of evil.

It is an extraordinarily merciful response on God’s part, especially when you consider our world, and the sort of response that we human beings might make in a similar situation.

Suppose, for example, Father Abraham were to take human delegates to the top of a tall mountain, and show them all the prisons in our nation where condemned people wait on death row. At present there are something like 3000 men and women on death row in our nation. And suppose from the top of the mountain Abraham could show these human delegates all of these. And he would say: “Among so many on death row there must be a few who are actually innocent. Would you be willing to commute the sentences of all 3000 so that the lives of the innocent ones would be spared?” The human delegates would answer: “I don’t think we can do that. You’ve got to be tough on crime, you know, even if a few innocent ones have to suffer.”

Or, suppose Abraham took this human delegation to a tall mountain where they could look out on all the wars that rage in our world. And Abraham would ask: “Would you be willing to stop all these wars so that the innocent bystanders—women and children—would be spared?” And the human delegation would say: “Well, we can’t do that. Sometimes war is the only way to protect our borders and get what we need. It’s too bad if some innocent ones get hurt. Of course, we don’t call them innocent. We call it ‘collateral damage.’”

Or, once more, suppose Abraham took these representatives of humankind to overlook our welfare system—food stamps and other housing assistance. From the tall mountain they could see some who truly needed the program, and others who abused the system. And again Abraham would ask: “Would you be willing to extend these programs of assistance, even if there were some abuse, so that children who are truly needy would get what they need?” And the delegation would answer: “We can’t do that. We can’t have those welfare queens riding around in their Cadillacs. We’ve got to restrict these programs, even if some needy ones suffer. You have to break some eggs to make an omelet.”

How different is the answer of humanity from the answer of God: “For the sake of ten righteous, I will not destroy the great number of evil ones.” God is more merciful than we are.

Of course, when it comes to talking about the righteous and the wicked, it’s not all that clear who belongs in each group. When it comes to talking about good and bad apples, we’re not even sure in which basket we belong.

In our most honest moments, we must admit that we are infected with evil as well. We stand in need of this mercy of God. We know about our own grubby greed, our petty prejudices that exclude, our actions that hurt, our words that wound. It is we who need to hear the merciful word of God: “For the sake of ten righteous, I will not destroy them.” That’s good news for us.

But, you know, in his conversation with God, Abraham never pushes the conversation as far as it can go. “Suppose fifty righteous can be found . . . forty-five . . . thirty . . . twenty . . . ten.” But Abraham never asks the final question: “Suppose, Lord, only one righteous person can be found.” And suppose, Lord, that one righteous has to balance out the evil, not just of one city, but of an entire planet. We are only dust and ashes, Lord. We don’t

have a right to ask. But could one righteous one balance off the evil of an entire world? Could one good apple improve the whole bunch?

No answer to that question can be found in the 18th chapter of Genesis. The conversation between God and Abraham breaks off without that final question being asked. And the next day Abraham returns to the spot and sees the charred remains of the city going up in smoke, the Lord's judgment having been delivered. Presumably not even ten righteous could be found.

No, it remains for a much later story in the Bible to speak of one righteous one who stands in for an evil world. It is the story of one who bears his own cross to the hill of Golgotha, and who cries out in death, and at whose death a soldier proclaims: "Truly this man was the Son of God." One righteous one, dying for the sake of the many, dying for you and me.

Here is Paul: "Just as one man's [Adam's] trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." One good apple saving the bunch. One good man saving the world.

The traditional spot where Jesus was crucified is now occupied by a church, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one of the holiest places in all Christianity. Christians from all over the world, of all different persuasions—Catholic and Orthodox and Protestant—come to this solemn spot where soldiers gambled for his clothing and his cross was dropped into the earth with a thud and where he breathed his last. Pilgrims come to sit in the sanctuary of that church to ponder what happened there.

Those who wander around might also find themselves discovering that underneath the sanctuary is another small chapel, called the Chapel of Adam. You see, tradition has it that the hill where Jesus was crucified was also the hill where Adam was buried. And the blood of Jesus dripped down through the fissures in the rock down onto the rotten corpse of Adam, and redeemed him.

It is, I grant you, an unlikely possibility that this is literally true. But in a larger sense it is exactly true. The Lord of life giving his life for the sins of the world.

So how about it? Can one good apple improve the whole bunch? What do you think?✠