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Genesis 18:20-32, Luke 11:1-13

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

Then [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 18:20-32)

Let us never underestimate the importance of a few saints for the life of the city. Why, for the sake of ten righteous persons, the Lord would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah. Let us strive to be among the ten in our town.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord: I mean to speak with you this morning about the importance of your life *for our world*. That the conduct of your life is important *for yourself* and for your loved ones is obvious and has been taught to you from your mother’s knee, most likely. But I want to invite you to broaden your perspective, to lift your gaze, and to reckon with the weighty thought that you are important for the universe — indeed, that you are among those who are helping to keep our world alive, our city safe, and our church strong.

You might not be accustomed to thinking of yourself that way — as important for the community. Presidents and mayors and senators and such: you might suppose they are the ones who matter to the flow of reality, and not yourself. But such humility is precisely my point, precisely your advantage. God above, though he be high and mighty, loves to regard the lowly ones of earth. And if you be among those lowly ones, you thereby occupy a position of influence in the universe! How you live your life is important for our city. Indeed, you have the chance to be among the ten righteous ones for whose sake the Lord says about the city, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” You have a chance to be one of

those humble saints for whose sake the Lord will spare the city. So, live and pray for the city, never give up, and never be overly discouraged.

I have just said, “Live *and* pray for the city.” Both of these good deeds are important: both the living and the praying — both the righteousness of your life and your prayers of intercession on behalf of our city. The fate of Sodom and Gomorrah rested on those threads — not on armies or navies or kings — but on the morality of the people and upon the prayers of intercession of Abraham.

Let us take them in turn: both righteousness and prayer. There is no need to go on a pilgrimage, nor need to grab a sword and fling it against barbarians. There is plenty of good work for us to do, each of us, here in the city. There is the good work of prayer and the good work of a righteous manner of life.

We begin with righteousness. This past week I was very proud to attend the robing and swearing-in ceremony for one of our members: Marc Whiten — now *Judge* Marc Whiten, Judge of the Civil Court of the City of New York. Marc and his wife Kay, along with their two daughters Kelly and Kimberly, usually sit over yonder here at Immanuel, on the lectern side. The girls are twins, and my! they are twenty years old now, soon starting their senior year in college. I taught Catechism to them, it seemed just yesterday.

This past week’s robing ceremony was inspiring and heartwarming for many reasons.

We began with a Boy Scout Honor Guard presenting the colors, along with the singing of “America the Beautiful.” This was a salute to Marc’s decades of leadership in the Scouts. There were great speeches by politicians, judges, and Marc’s cousin Darcel, who is a minister for the Diocese of Rockville Center and who sang a very moving verse from the hymn “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” There was the swearing-in on the family Bible and that dramatic and happy moment when the Judge’s robes were first put on him and he was officially addressed as Judge Marc Whiten. But I think the best part was simply the end part — the part where Marc spoke to us.

In his beautiful way, Marc expressed gratitude for many people in his life. I want to mention just one: his father. Back in 1941, Marc’s father left Harlem and headed south to join what became the famous and honored “Tuskegee Airmen.” When an American bomber pilot during the Second World War looked out his window and saw that he was being escorted by a P51 Mustang with a red stripe on the fighter plane’s vertical stabilizer, that bomber pilot would usually breathe a sigh of relief, for he knew he was being escorted by some of the most brave and skillful pilots in the Army Air Corps. What he might not have known is that he was being escorted by a black airman, for all of the pilots of the 99th Fighter Squadron and of the 332nd Fighter Group were black airmen.

The odds were against them. So-called “scientific” studies back then had argued that black people were not up to the intellectual and leadership challenges necessary to be a fighter pilot — a claim that now offends and embarrasses us to hear, but which was believed far too often back then. The black airmen were segregated from other airmen, which meant that the Tuskegee Airmen did not have day-to-day access to experienced white fighter pilots and so could not learn from their experiences. But the Tuskegee Airmen fought with and helped down the Luftwaffe and

defended our bombers and became an elite and honored airmen’s corp.

Now, think of the patriotism and determination it took for a young black man from a humble hardworking family in Harlem to head off down south, to Alabama, to train for his country in a part of the country, and in a day and an age, that was uneasy with him precisely because he was black.

Here is the line in Marc’s speech I especially liked. Marc said that his father was part of a generation of black people who overcame the Jim Crow laws down South. And, Marc said, they overcame those laws “not by blowing things up or even by becoming legislators, but simply by living lives of dignity in face of indignity.”

Now, that’s what I’m talking about. Never underestimate the importance of a few saints for the life of the city. When Abraham interceded for the city, he did not phrase his intercession in terms of power or genius. He did not say, “what if ten righteous politicians can be found... ten righteous judges... ten righteous university professors... ten righteous actors... ten righteous billionaires?” No, he simply spoke of ten righteous people. Can they be found in the city? Are there quiet lives of dignity being lived in the city?

When you were baptized, your parents and the whole congregation were put in mind of the sayings of our Lord Jesus. A few grains of salt might have placed on your tongue. It is an ancient Baptismal practice. Whether the salt was placed on your tongue or no, still the blessed words of our Lord were meant for you:

You are the salt of the earth...(Matthew 5:13)

And when the Baptismal candle was given to you, the blessed words of Jesus were meant for you — even for you:

You are the light of the world...
(Matthew 5:14)

When all is said and done, and when the story of New York City is rehearsed in heaven, let it be sung by the angels that you and I were among the ten, or among the hundred, or among the million, please God, who lived righteous lives and thereby helped keep the city alive.

So, that is my first theme: A quiet life of dignity is worth an awful lot in this world — maybe even the saving of the city.

My second theme concerns a special deed *within* the righteous life. I mean the deed of prayer on behalf of others, including the town. See what grace Abraham won on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. The outcry against those towns was great and their sin very grave.¹ The outcry had reached to heaven and the Lord contemplated destroying those towns. But the prayers of Abraham gave those towns a chance. The townsfolk did not know it, but a good man stood off yonder and prayed for them and nearly won the victory for them, for Abraham negotiated their salvation all the way down to ten souls. The Lord gave his promise to Abraham that if he could find ten righteous persons in the town, he would spare it.

Indeed, two of Israel's later prophets, Jeremiah² and Ezekiel³ believed that if

¹ Then the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, ²¹I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know." (Genesis 18:20-21)

² Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look around and take note! Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth-- so that I may pardon Jerusalem. (Jeremiah 5:1)

³ I have been looking for someone among them to build a barricade and oppose me in the

Abraham had pressed for mercy all the way down to *one* righteous person, the Lord would have spared the town — so precious to the Lord are the prayers of intercession.

And it is no wonder, in a way, that the Lord loves the prayers of intercession, for we are probably never as innocent, nor ever so lovely, as when we are praying for others. There is a holy forgetfulness about intercessory prayer, in which we lay aside our own burdens and heartaches and desires and instead speak up on behalf of others.

The prophet and the preacher — those folks are called to speak *for* God *to* humanity. But the one who offers intercessory prayer speaks *to* God *for* humanity. And each of us can follow that pattern. We might have to say, I am no Preacher, but at least I can be a Prayer. I might have no eloquence for proclamation, but at least I have a good heart for prayer, and the Holy Spirit himself will take my poor words and make them wise on behalf of others.⁴

At the start of our Lutheran tradition stands a man of prayer: Martin Luther. Luther prayed, it is said, two to three hour a day, and having read his treatise on prayer⁵, I can well believe it. Luther believed in the power of prayer. Indeed, he believed that the young Reformation movement had been saved by people like Abraham — quiet people of dignity who prayed for others, even when those others

breach, to defend the country and prevent me from destroying it; but I have found no one. (Ezekiel 22:30, NJB)

⁴ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27, RSV)

⁵ *A Simple Way to Pray*, 1535.

might have been unaware of the prayers. And so we read Luther's magnificent tribute to prayer in his *Large Catechism*:

This we must know, that all our safety and protection consist in prayer alone. We are far too weak to cope with the devil and all his might and his forces arrayed against us, trying to trample us under foot. Therefore we must carefully select the weapons with which Christians ought to arm themselves in order to stand against the devil. What do you think has accomplished such great results in the past, parrying the counsels and plots of our enemies and checking their murderous and seditious designs by which the devil expected to crush us, and the Gospel as well, except that the prayers of a few godly men intervened like an iron wall on our side? Otherwise they would have witnessed a far different drama: the devil would have destroyed all Germany in its own blood. Now they may confidently ridicule and mock. But by prayer alone we shall be a match both for them and for the devil, if we only persevere diligently and do not become slack. For whenever a good Christian prays, "Dear Father, thy will be done," God replies from on high, "Yes, dear child, it shall indeed be done in spite of the devil and all the world." (Luther's *Large Catechism*, on "The Lord's Prayer.")

Let us strive to be part of the "iron wall" for our town. Let us pray for our town and for others, never giving up.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, Jesus urges his disciples to persevere in prayer:

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)

So pray on. Pray without ceasing.⁶ Pray for your son, though he might be in prison. Pray for your daughter in rehab. Pray for your husband, for your spouse. Pray for your enemy. Pray for the lazy. Pray for doubtful cases. Pray when you are happy, pray when you are tired. And in this way, you will follow the example of our Lord Jesus.

For when Jesus was dead tired on the cross, when his mind must have been groggy with fatigue, his nerves on fire because of the flaying of his flesh, and his muscles cramped with dehydration... when who could have blamed him for being unable to think two thoughts straight, yet there he was in prayer on behalf of others: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they did." A lifetime of intercessory prayer lay behind that last prayer on the cross. And such prayer continues even now for you and for me in the resurrected life of our Great Intercessor, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

⁶ Pray without ceasing. (1 Thess 5:17)