Friends of the Heart

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Genesis 18

Sermon Series:
A Journey of Faith –
A Study on the Life of Abraham

Every family has someone who is a bit challenging to others. Dale Galloway calls such irregular people “EGR” people. Extra Grace Required!

As the story of Abraham unfolds in the book of Genesis, we see all sorts of huge overlapping themes. Two of them that are especially apparent in our text today have to do with families and with the growth of our trust in the God who loves us. We begin by thinking about families. Think about your family. Not just those you may live with but your wider family of grandparents and aunts and uncles and great aunts and great uncles and nephews and nieces and cousins and so on. Family life can be complex with family personalities, arguments, joys and shared experiences. And then there are the family members who are frankly odd or who are challenging to you.

In her book Irregular People, author Joyce Landorf writes about the person in your life “who really bugs you to death.” She is not talking about the crazy driver ahead of you or the clerk at the store who ignores you to talk on a cell phone or somebody in your office. She says, “The irregular person I’m talking about is a person you are related to—like your parents, a brother, sister, cousin, uncle, aunt, or even in-laws. And, in some cases, even a husband or a wife.” Someone commissioned a professional biographer to create a book of her family history. She warned her about the family’s very irregular person—Uncle George, who was given the electric chair for murder. The biographer assured her, “There will be no embarrassment. I will merely say that Uncle George occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution!” Every family has someone who is a bit challenging to others. Dale Galloway calls such irregular people “EGR” people. Extra Grace Required! Sometimes, such family members lead us to remarkable expressions of grace or to rather painful long-lasting divisions. Believe me, Abraham and Sara were, at times, irregular people, and their nephew, Lot, was highly irregular. Of course, I just can’t imagine that any one of us here happens to be such an irregular EGR person to anyone else!

When Abram and Sarai left their hometown in Ur of the Chaldees, Abram’s nephew, Lot, and all of his possessions accompanied them. I imagine Abram and Lot had a great Uncle-Nephew relationship. Sometime after leaving their hometown, their combined
flocks were so huge that the herders of their livestock were fighting. So Abram says, “Lot, let’s not fight about this. We’re brothers. Look at the land all around us. Choose any direction you want to go and I will take my flocks in the opposite direction. So Lot is graciously given first pick; he sees that the Jordan River plain is watered, rich and settled with cities, and he chooses the best for himself. Abram and Lot separate, but Lot, who then settles in the town of Sodom, gets into trouble. Four conquering kings raid Sodom and take off with Lot and his belongings. Abram hears about it, takes his fighting men and rescues Lot. Clearly he loves Lot and feels a duty to protect him. They separate again for a long time.

Sodom was famous for its disregard for human dignity. The people were arrogant, they were unconcerned for those in need, and they had no sense regarding appropriate sexual conduct. As Ezekiel said, “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me” (Ezekiel 16:49-50a). Lot rose to a position of prominence in Sodom, sort of like being the mayor or on the town council. He does some rather disgusting, despicable things. Yet, the story of Genesis is not about the purity of Abraham and the sin of Lot because both men fell short of their Lord many times—as we do. Just as God repeatedly showed grace and mercy to Abraham, so Abraham showed grace and mercy to his nephew—which led to one of the most famous conversations in history, the conversation between Abraham and God.

The Lord said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!” Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place? Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” And so it went. What about forty-five? What about forty? What about thirty? How about twenty? Say just ten? And the Lord replied, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” Of course we know what happens. There aren’t even ten righteous in the city, but, as Genesis 19 reports, “So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow” (Genesis 19:29). Lot is saved, not because he was good but because Abraham interceded for him. Abraham stood for the same mercy for Lot that Abraham received from the God who loves him.

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Twenty-five years ago, several thousand Presbyterians attended the Congress on Renewal held in Dallas, Texas. I will never forget an evening worship service held there in the Convention Center. Dale Bruner was preaching about the story of the prodigal son who demands his inheritance and abandons his dad and his brother. The son was “irregular” and EGR (Extra Grace Required). He went off into the “far country,” where he squandered his inheritance, was reduced to feeding pigs, not even eating food as good as the pigs’ food. The boy “comes to his senses” and starts home. I will never forget Dale Bruner bringing one phrase into dramatic life. And, by the way, you can see why I am very happy Dale Bruner is going to be with us at VPC March 2-3 and why I cannot imagine missing him. This man is one of the finest Bible teachers in the entire world. Please make coming a priority.

Of the young man who was heading home we read, “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him…” (Luke 15:20). There was only one way his dad would have seen him a long way off. The father was watching. And waiting. And watching. And waiting. And watching and watching. As the boy approaches his home, the most dominant characteristic of the landscape are the huge eyes of the father like gigantic spheres looking over the horizon, looking, longing, loving the son of his heart.

In a similar way, Abraham, like the irregular, EGR, prodigal son, found himself in the “far country.” He tried to substitute his wife for his own well-being by passing her off as his sister to Pharaoh. He tried to substitute Hagar for Sarai as the mother of his children with disastrous results. Yet, always the gigantic loving eyes of God, like giant spheres on the horizon, were looking, longing for this son of God’s heart and for Sarai, this daughter of God’s heart. Time and again, God comes to Abram and after he falls, picks him up.

Just as God treated Abraham by looking after and longing for him, so Abraham treated Lot in just the same way. It’s a great picture of how we may relate to the irregular people in our own lives. God had said, “Abram I will bless you so that you will be a blessing.” Abram passes the blessing to his irregular, EGR nephew, Lot, who chooses the best for himself and who lived in a town famous for its audacious, inappropriate appetites. Yet, it was Abraham who gave Lot the choice of the best land, Abraham who rescued him, Abraham who intercedes for him when Sodom was threatened. Abraham had received grace, and he passed it on.
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One of the most wonderful things said about Abraham in the rest of the Bible is that he is called, “the friend of God.” When Abraham wanted to discuss the potential destruction of Sodom with God, we read, “Abraham came near.” In other words, he was very comfortable talking with the Lord who loves him. As the Book of Hebrews puts it, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

One Sunday morning, when our son Lee was five years old, about two minutes after eleven I was sitting behind the pulpit of the Covenant Presbyterian Church in West Lafayette, Indiana. Hoyt Byrum, the other associate pastor, was offering the morning's welcome, greeting and announcements, when I saw half of the congregation turn their heads away from Hoyt and look at something I couldn't see, because the pulpit was in the way. In just that moment, Hoyt interrupted his announcements and said, "Hi, Lee!" And there that five-year-old boy came marching right up the steps of the chancel in front of everyone, directly to me and said to me, "Dad, I can’t find Mom." What was I to do? Five hundred people were watching this little scenario. I stood up, took his hand, walked him across the chancel and to the sanctuary door while everyone was having a good laugh. Lee said, "Dad, why are they laughing at me." I said, "Lee, they aren't laughing at you, they are laughing at me."

I passed him to Ann Marie and went back into the sanctuary, assuming that was the end of the incident and that I’d never hear about it again. I was so wrong. For years, and I mean for years, I'd find myself in conversations with someone or other who happened to be in church that particular morning and they'd say to me, "You know Stan, when that little child walked into the sanctuary intent on approaching his dad, with absolutely no concern for all the people watching or what was going on or what people might think, I suddenly realized that he was showing me the very freedom I have to approach my God boldly regardless of what is going on or what people might think and to tell God about whatever is on my mind." That was the freedom with which Abraham drew near to God, the same freedom you and I have. I spoke with Lee Friday. Thirty years later, he remembers it vividly.

What is remarkable about Abraham as the friend of God is that it was not Abraham who made that statement but God. “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend” (Isaiah 41:8). Then we hear Jehoshaphat’s prayer: “Did you not, O our God, drive out...
We know there is no more precious friendship than your friendship with the Lord who loves you.

The inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham?” (II Chronicles 20:7). And the New Testament Book of James, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called the friend of God” (James 2:23).

We see the same idea made even more significant for us in the words of Jesus. He was talking to his disciples in the Upper Room: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). Jesus calls you, who embrace and trust in and follow him, his friend. This is not “we” singing the words of the famous hymn, “What a friend we have in Jesus” but rather it is Jesus saying, “What a friend I have in you!” What makes for a great friendship? The freedom to talk any time. The freedom to be together without saying anything. It’s showing up in your friend’s life when the chips are down or they’ve taken a tumble. Extending mercy to your friend when she/he is in an “EGR” place. That is a picture of Abraham’s friendship with God and our friendship with Jesus. As Abraham Lincoln, whose birthday we remember today, said, “The better part of one’s life consists of his [one’s] friendships….”

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In the past, I have talked with you about the difference between a friendship of the road and a friendship of the heart. A friendship of the road is a friendship that comes as you walk life’s road with someone. You are in the same office, the same neighborhood, the same church or the same social group. However, when one of you leaves the shared road by moving to a different office or neighborhood or whatever, the friendship of the road comes to an end. A friendship of the heart, on the other hand, is a very deep, permanent bond between you and someone else. Your friend of the heart could be living in Europe, you may not see each other for ten years and your friendship is as deep and loving and mutually encouraging as ever. Abraham was God’s friend of the heart as was God for Abraham. The Lord who loves you loves to be your friend of the heart.

As we have been moving through the story of Abraham and Sarah, there is a pattern of Abraham’s behavior that wonderfully illustrates his friendship of the heart with God. After God sends Abram and Sarai on their way, we read in Genesis 12:7 that Abram builds an altar to the Lord. After some more travel (12:8), Abram builds another altar and calls on the name of the Lord. Some time later, he comes back

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to an altar he had built (13:4) and calls again on the name of the Lord. After still more travel he builds another altar. In other words, Abraham sought time with the Lord who loves us. It’s why I find taking time each morning early to read some of the Bible and to pray helps keep me connected with the Lord who loves you. Glenda writes fabulous daily devotionals that will help you do this. I know the challenge in your crazy, busy life to set a few minutes aside, but it can change your life. Get to know the dearest friend of your heart, the Lord who loves you.

In recent months, I have been reading histories of the First World War and the brutality of the war in the trenches. The English, French and German armies were deadlocked for years, hunkered down in gigantic trenches separated by a no-man’s land covered with barbed wire, mud, misery and machine gun fire. It has reminded me of a story that I heard during my first week as a college freshman. We had gathered for a pep rally, and the speaker began to encourage us to find some life friends during the coming four years.

He told the story of Bill and Joe, two boys from neighboring families who grew up as best friends in the early years of the twentieth century. They went through grade school, junior high and high school together, playing on the same teams, taking the same courses, paling around with the same friends. When World War I broke out, Bill and Joe signed up at the same time, went through basic training together and were assigned to the same troop unit. They were put aboard ship and went to Europe where they were stationed at the front line in one of those horrible trenches.

One night, Bill accompanied a patrol that went out over the no-man’s land. On their way back, he was hit by a shell fragment. Terribly wounded, he fell, barely able to breathe. His patrol was unaware anything had happened to him until they were back and Bill wasn’t with them. Joe was frantic. He approached his commanding officer and asked permission to go out looking for Bill. The captain said, “No. Don’t go private. It is far too dangerous.” Joe went to his place, waited a couple of hours and then slipped out over the top of the trench and out into no-man’s land. He didn’t come back. The next day a patrol discovered both men lying together. Bill was dead. Joe was barely alive. He had found Bill and picked him up. On the way back, a stray bullet struck Joe and both men fell down. Joe was carried back to his lines barely holding onto life. The captain came to see him, “Joe, why did you disobey a direct order. I told you that it was far too dangerous.” Joe replied, “Sir, before Bill died, he said only one thing to me. He said, “I knew you’d come.”
I will never forget the speaker who told that story, going on to say that in life we will meet many people but that there is nothing greater than finding a few “I knew you’d come” friendships, “friends of the heart.” So I say to you, value, treasure and love your “I knew you’d come” friends of the heart while always remaining open to the possibility of new ones. Be an altar builder like Abraham. Spend time with your Lord each day in a time of Bible reading and prayer, and cultivate the ultimate friend of your heart. He loves you!