

The Heart and Soul of God's Reputation

Numbers 14:1-4, 11-23

Sermon by Dan Schrock

July 24, 2016

¹⁴Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ²And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt."

¹¹And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? ¹²I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they."

¹³But Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, ¹⁴and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people; for you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, ¹⁶'It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.' ¹⁷And now, therefore, let the power of the LORD be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, ¹⁸'The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.' ¹⁹Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now."

²⁰Then the LORD said, "I do forgive, just as you have asked; ²¹nevertheless—as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD— ²²none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, ²³shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it. (NRSV)

I

While living in Miami in my early 20s, I was mentored by a man named Leroy, who cared very much about his reputation in the community. Leroy cared about his reputation because he was both a businessman and a pastor. Leroy believed his success as a businessman depended mostly on how other people evaluated his character. For him this started with selling a quality product: Gravely lawnmowers. He believed Gravely lawnmowers were the best, more reliable lawnmowers made. As a business owner his goals were to sell great mowers at a fair price, to repair mowers quickly and reliably, to treat his customers as personal friends, and to make things right with his wholesaler or his customers when things went wrong, even if that meant losing money in the short

term. As a result, Leroy's business prospered. He was able to provide a steady middle-class income for himself and his family, plus his employees and their families.

The business was Leroy's day job. On evenings and weekends his other job was pastoring the Southmost Mennonite Church. In this job he also cared about his reputation. For instance, he wanted to be known as a generous person because he thought generosity was a big part of Christian discipleship. In order to be as generous as possible, he and his wife chose a lower-middle class lifestyle. They wore ordinary clothes. They lived in a smallish house. They ran their car until the cost of repairing it no longer made financial sense. When they needed to buy something, they bought quality and expected it to last for many years. This sturdy, simple lifestyle allowed them to give away lots of money to the Mennonite Church.

Leroy was also generous with his time. I helped him do church work for several years, and during the many hours we spent together Leroy mentored me in leadership. Generosity was such a high value for him that if anyone would have accused him of being stingy, he would have been deeply wounded—and he would have immediately dreamed up some act of outrageous generosity in order to save his reputation.

II

God cares about God's own reputation at least as much as my mentor Leroy cared about his reputation. Consider our story from Numbers 14, which begins with the Israelites in a hissy fit of frustration. Spies have just returned from the land of Canaan, that supposedly wonderful place where they will finally settle down and build their lives. The spies say Canaan has good soil that grows excellent crops. The catch is that the land has lots of people already living there. Two spies, Caleb and Joshua, believe those people won't be a problem. The rest of the spies disagree. Most of the spies say those Canaanites are going to be a big problem. *The Canaanites are like giants, they say, and compared to them we Israelites are like grasshoppers* (13:25-33).

At this news the frustration in the Israelite camp switches to anger. *We would have been better off dying in Egypt!* the men complain to Moses. *Why did God bring us here?*

Those Canaanites will murder us, rape our wives, and enslave our children! Let's ditch Moses and choose another leader who will take us back to Egypt (14:1-4)!

Moses hears all of this in one of his ear. In the other ear he hears God—and it turns out God is just as frustrated with the Israelites as the Israelites are frustrated with God. *How long must I endure these people?* God laments to Moses. *They despise me. They refuse to believe in me despite all the wonderful things I've done for them. I've had it with them. I'm going to kill them off. Just get rid of them. Then I'm going to make a great nation out of you and your descendants (14:11-12).*

These are stiff words, on both sides. On one side, Israel threatens to abandon Moses and Moses' God, turn around, and march back to Egypt—back to slavery, back to making bricks for Pharaoh's building projects. On the other side, God threatens to kill off these descendants of Abraham and Sarah and start all over again with Moses and his descendants. The stakes are exceptionally high. This could be the final angry moment in what has often been an emotionally stormy relationship between Israel and God. The relationship is one centimeter away from collapsing.

III

During this emotional storm, Moses intercedes in prayer. An intercessor is someone who, in prayer to God, pleads for other people and other situations. In this particular intercessory prayer Moses' goal is to change God's mind, to persuade God to be generous and merciful to Israel. His prayer is concise, only 212 words long in English, something you can pray in a minute or two. The brevity of his prayer illustrates that our intercessory prayers do not have to be long. Sometimes a short prayer will do just fine.

I want us to notice Moses' rhetorical strategy in this prayer. With unusual bluntness and sharply worded phrases, Moses appeals to God's reputation. The main argument he uses with God is that God's international reputation is on the line. The logic goes something like this. *Look God, says Moses, ever since we left Egypt you've been building up a reputation in the world. With all those plagues and that dramatic exodus, the nation of Egypt learned a lesson about how powerful you are, about how nothing and no one*

defeats you. Other nations heard about the dramatic stuff you did in Egypt. You enhanced your stature, your honor, and your name in the world. People now respect you.

But think what will happen to your reputation if you wipe out the Israelites. The nations will sneer at you. They will change their opinion and regard you as a little, impotent god who can't even keep the promises you made. In the court of world opinion, your name will be mud. Your integrity will vanish.

Instead what you should do is keep your own promises. You promised the Israelites to be "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." You promised to "forgive iniquity" (v. 18, cf. Ex. 34:6-7). So if you want to be a truly great God, if you want to continue showing your immense and fabulous power to the world, then keep your promises! Do what you said you would do and forgive the Israelites. Do it for the sake of your reputation. Do it for your own self-interest! What kind of respect will you get if you say one thing and do another?

IV

This is bold, audacious prayer. You might be tempted to think that Moses' strategy of appealing to God's reputation is not typical for the Bible, but you would be wrong about that. Other verses in Exodus 32, Deuteronomy 9, Psalm 79, Jeremiah 14, Joel 2, Isaiah 48, along with others, all indicate how concerned God is about his reputation in the world. Biblical intercessors know this; and when biblical intercessors want to take their prayers to the max, they appeal to God's reputation. In prayer, biblical intercessors will typically argue the way Moses argued: *God, you should do thus and so because if you do not, your name and honor and glory and reputation will diminish. If you don't act in this situation, people will think you're impotent.*

God is persuaded by Moses' prayer and responds "I do forgive, just as you have asked" (v. 20). God does care about reputation, and for the sake of that reputation God will not destroy Israel. Moses successfully appeals to God's public image. God will be generous to Israel, because generous mercy is one of God's core characteristics. The Israelites will all live. The present generation will not enter Canaan, yet God will be

merciful. God knows that the divine reputation in the world depends on being merciful and patient.

This story shows that God does indeed heed intercessory prayer, maybe especially when that prayer appeals to God's reputation. If in intercessory prayer we point to the health of God's ongoing reputation as a reason for doing something, or not doing something, we would merely do what biblical characters have done before us.

By the end of Numbers 14, a relationship on the verge of a permanent breakup has been healed. Here lies a dramatic demonstration of how important intercessory prayer can be. Because of Moses' blunt and brave prayer, the rift between God and Israel is healed. God does not abandon Israel, and Israel does not walk away from God. They will continue in partnership with each other. Israel—and we who read this story—now know that generous mercy is the heart and soul of God's reputation.