

should not recommit. There is no judgment on that decision. It is better to not commit than to commit without willingness. So, any given year, if no one recommits, the Church of the Covenant could cease to exist. The point is that we are not to become attached to being a church or perpetuating a church. We are to live our lives committed to and trusting in God alone, remaining constantly alive to God's spirit.

There is another significance to the story. The death of Isaac would mean the loss of the very future God had promised Abraham. Isaac was the "miracle child" of Abraham's and Sarah's old age. He embodied the promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (Gen. 12:2; 15:5). God's call to Abraham in the beginning asked that he leave his past, his relatives and home, and trust God completely (Gen. 12). Now Abraham is asked to let go of even the promise and the future, to not even cling to God's blessings. Faith is a matter of trusting God in each present moment, open always to God's present leading and call, not clinging to anything that would keep us from such openness of spirit and life. The story reminds us that we can end up clinging to God's blessings and promises, and stop being attentive to the living God. God's promise of a blessed future for Abraham and through him for the world came in response to Abraham's complete openness to God, his lack of clinging, his willingness to respond, and his love of God as God, not for any blessings God might bestow.

For all of the difficulties this story may pose for us today, I still think it is very important for us. If we are willing to let go of our most cherished attachment or addiction or however you want to put it, then we are opening our lives to God alone and the new life that comes from God. If we are working always to let go of the past and even the future, and to live fully in the present moment, as attentive as we can be to the mystery and presence of God to whom we most deeply belong, then we experience what faith is really about. It is trust in God for who God is, beyond our understanding and grasp, not for what we can get from God but for what God seeks to do through us.

Well, I don't know whether I hit it, fouled it off, or struck out. But there are some stories in our spiritual tradition that will not go away. They are there with a challenging solidity that stretches the boundaries of our understanding. If we let them, they can open up in our hearts and minds the great mystery of God who loves us and invites us always to live in complete faith and trust.

June 29, 2008/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Abraham and Isaac: A Challenging Story of Faith

Genesis 22:1-19 *So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"....*

In the movie *A League of Their Own*, Dottie, the standout catcher for the Rockford Peaches, advises her pitcher on throwing to Dottie's younger sister Kit. It's the last inning of the championship game. Dottie is eager to teach Kit a lesson; Kit is eager to prove herself to her older sister. "High fast ball," says Dottie. "She can't hit them and she can't lay off of them." That scene popped into my mind this week as I decided to work with the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. It is a challenging story, very tempting to avoid. There are elements of it that thoughtful people find objectionable. Some question whether or not we should even give attention to this story these days. A God who demands the sacrifice of a child as a demonstration of obedience is not a God that appeals to us. We could write it off as a dated and offensive story with a view of God that we can no longer hold. As sympathetic as I am to such concerns, the story still holds a strong fascination for me. I can't lay off of it. I don't know whether or not I can hit it. But I felt I had to take a swing. There are some stories in scripture that are so compelling that, in spite of our contemporary objections, we benefit from the effort to listen to them as deeply as we can.

God tests Abraham's willingness to trust God in all things and over all things. The idea of God's testing us is an ancient one. It provides a way for people to embrace their experiences in a spiritually fruitful way. Instead of seeing a difficult experience as bad luck or tragedy, people of faith could meet their experience in ways that brought strength and a deepening of their faith and obedience--as a test. Jesus is baptized and immediately the spirit of God drives him out into the desert for testing. It is common for spiritual leaders and teachers to go through such experiences of testing. This is understood as an important part of spiritual deepening and maturity. Testing, or temptation, makes faith more real, stronger. It transforms faith from ideas in our heads to a way of living in the world, loving and trusting God within the realities of our lives.

However, the thought of God testing Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac does disturb us. In his commentary on Genesis, Claus Westermann reminds us that child sacrifice was never practiced in Israel's life as a people. In fact, it was explicitly prohibited. There may have been such a practice in some neighboring cults in those days, but not for Israel. Then, why

would the God of compassion and mercy and justice ask such a thing, especially when God has already condemned child sacrifice? Well, the storyteller does not answer that question directly. The storyteller lets us know from the beginning that this is a test, that God has no intention of letting Abraham go through with it (C. Westermann; also G. Von Rad). That may only confuse us further. Is God just playing with Abraham's devotion, jerking him around? Again, that's our mindset, not the storyteller's. We are invited to let go of our contemporary objections so that we can, indeed, really listen to the story.

Though the test is never to be carried out from God's viewpoint, Abraham doesn't know that. Yet, he doesn't question. He doesn't show any emotion. He simply does as God asks. The story is told in agonizing detail as Abraham makes preparations for the journey. The story builds up in emotion and tension for us, the readers. Twice the storyteller says that Abraham and his son "walked on together," slowly, agonizingly toward the place of the sacrifice. By the time Isaac calls out, "Father!" and his father answers, "Here I am, my son," our hearts are ready to break. When Isaac asks his father about a lamb for the sacrifice, Abraham gently protects his son from the truth while at the same time leaving the door open for another possible outcome: "God himself will provide the lamb." When Abraham finally takes the knife to kill Isaac, we feel desperate to stop this unthinkable act. It is only at this very last instant that the messenger of God stops Abraham's hand. The storyteller crafts the messenger's words so that the messenger and God are one and the same; it is God who speaks, who stops Abraham's hand. Abraham's willingness to trust God in all things, even to the point of losing what was most precious to him, is why this story became an indelible part of the history of our spiritual tradition.

On one level, the story re-affirms God's rejection of human sacrifice. On the deeper level, however, it is an intense story about what it means to live with ultimate trust in God alone. Christianity has made use of this story as a kind of precursor of the story of Jesus as God's son who WAS sacrificed by his heavenly Father for our benefit. However, I don't think it is desirable to go in that direction. The story needs to stand on its own. It is about the nature of faith, what faith is and why it is so important. Faith literally means trust. It means living in trustful ways, keeping ourselves always open to God's leading and the new things God wants to do through us for the world. Faith is about not clinging to anything, even what is most cherished. The only way that new life can emerge for us and the world is to be willing to let go of our

attachments, the things that keep us from living with a constant sensitivity to God's reality and presence.

One summer while in seminary, I attended the Breadloaf Writer's Conference in Middlebury, VT. I heard poets talking about the necessity for us would-be writers to be willing to "murder our darlings." That was a shocking way to put it. What they meant was that in order to let a poem be written through us, we need to be willing to drop the word or line to which we have become most attached. That may be the very thing that is keeping something more creative and alive from emerging.

The deepest spiritual wisdom is that whatever we become attached to blocks our openness to the living God. That's what idolatry is--making something an object of our loyalty and clinging, something other than God who is not an object or a "thing" to be possessed, but the mysterious Power of Life calling us to let go, to follow, and to trust. We know what attachments mean in a negative sense when it comes to addictions. What we are addicted to takes over our life, rules our whole being. The same thing happens when it comes to attachments to people. We cling to someone for their love, their approval, their charisma, their strength of character, or whatever. We give up our autonomy, the living of our own lives, knowing who we are, what our gifts are, what we are called to do with our lives. We become attached to experiences that keep us in the past. Even difficult and painful things—anger, hurt, unhappiness, whatever—become objects of our attachment, giving our lives a certain meaning, painful as it is. These are our "darlings" God calls us to let go of.

In our life as the Church of the Covenant, the challenge may come when we become attached to a ministry and its success, so much so that we stop being responsive to God's spirit trying to do new things through us. When we find ourselves clinging to a ministry with a determination to make it succeed or continue, without always keeping ourselves open to the fresh winds of God's spirit, then we have stopped living by faith, by the ultimate trust seen in Abraham. Commitment and openness to God's spirit must always go together. This has been our approach to membership itself. Covenant and Community Membership are ways of making a commitment out of freedom and love to the life of discipleship to Jesus. The purpose is to grow in "making God's will dominant in our lives," as the Covenant Member commitment says. Membership commitments are renewed each year for one year only. If any of us who are Community or Covenant Members do not feel called to work seriously and actively with the spiritual disciplines, then we