

June 26, 2011 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### **Abraham and Isaac: A Story That Won't Go Away**

Genesis 22:1-14(15-19)      *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 is the last inning of the championship game. Dottie wants to teach Kit a lesson in humility; 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." I remember that scene whenever the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac, or some other difficult portion, comes around in the lectionary. It would be easy to avoid this story, for it has elements that thoughtful people find highly objectionable. A God who demands the sacrifice of a child as a test of obedience is abhorrent these days when we are so aware of violence against children. Maybe we should drop this as a dated and offensive tale with a view of God that we must reject. I do, in fact, believe that there are times when we need to speak against parts of scripture that seem to give voice to violence, intolerance, or a narrow view of God. Scripture is not ultimate. It can point us to God when we work faithfully with it, but God is always beyond and more than scripture.

I am sympathetic to the concerns about this story. Yet it continues to hold a strong fascination for me. I just can't lay off of it. I don't know whether or not I can hit it, but I always want to step into the box and 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. After all, the stories may not be saying what we THINK they are saying.

God tests Abraham's willingness to remain in a relationship of ultimate trust, to trust God in all things and over all things. The idea of God's testing us is an ancient one. It is found in all major religious traditions. Testing is a way of making spiritual sense out of difficult experiences and living those experiences in a spiritually fruitful way. As people of faith, we can meet even our most difficult experiences in ways that bring strength and a deepening of our faith. In other words, as a test. After his baptism, Jesus is immediately driven by God's spirit out into the desert for testing. It is common for spiritual leaders and teachers to go through such experiences of testing. Testing, or temptation,

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.

The idea of God testing Abraham's faith by telling him to sacrifice his son does disturb us. However, in his commentary on Genesis, Claus Westermann informs us that human sacrifice was never practiced in Israel. It was explicitly prohibited. Then why would the God of compassion, mercy, and justice ask such a thing, especially when God has already condemned child sacrifice? Well, the story simply does not answer that question. The story lets us know from the beginning that this is a test, and that God has no intention of letting Abraham go through with it (C. Westermann; also G. Von Rad). That may only make things worse. Is God just jerking Abraham 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.

The story is told in agonizing detail and builds up in emotion and tension. Twice the storyteller says that Abraham and his son "walked on together," slowly, agonizingly toward the place of the sacrifice. By the time they arrive and Isaac calls out, "Father!", and his father answers, "Here I am, my son," our hearts are ready to break. Father, where is the lamb for the sacrifice? Abraham gently protects his son from the truth, while leaving the door open for another possible outcome: "God himself will provide the lamb." **That God will provide as we live in faithfulness and trust, though we do not know when or how, is probably the heart of this story, if not the whole of scripture.**

When Abraham finally raises the knife to kill Isaac, we feel desperate to stop this unthinkable act. At the very last instant, the messenger of God holds back Abraham's hand. We begin to see that the messenger and God are one and the same. It is God 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 our spiritual tradition.**

**On one level, the story may have functioned originally to re-affirm God's rejection of human sacrifice. On the deeper level, it is an intense story about what it means to live with ultimate trust in God alone.** It is about the nature of faith, what faith is and why it is so important. Faith literally means living trustfully. It means always keeping ourselves 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 if we are willing to let go of our attachments, the things that keep us from living with a constant sensitivity to God's

presence, call, and leading.

One summer while in seminary, I attended the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in Middlebury, VT. I remember hearing poets talk about the necessity for us fledgling writers to be willing to "murder our darlings." That was a shocking way to put it. They meant that in order to let something be written through us, we need to be willing to drop the word or image to which we have become most attached. That may be the thing 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 other than God the object of our loyalty and security. God is the mysterious Power of Life calling us to let go, to follow, and to trust. We know what attachments mean when it comes to addictions. What we are addicted to takes over our life, rules our whole being. The same thing happens with attachments to people. We cling to others 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 also become attached to experiences that keep us in the past. Even difficult and painful things—anger, hurt, unhappiness, whatever—become objects of our attachment; we hang onto them because they give our lives a certain meaning, painful as it is. These are some of 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 cling to a fixed idea of what we think a mission should be, with a determination to make it succeed or continue at any cost, we have stopped keeping ourselves open to the fresh winds of God's spirit. God may be trying to open us up to a new direction, a new shape to our ministry.

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 disciplines to which we commit are the framework that help us continue this trustful living, this letting go in order to respond to God's presence and call. 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 should not recommit. There is no judgment on that decision. It is

better to not commit than to commit without willingness, without integrity. It does us no good. It does others no good. 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 not to become attached to the idea of being a Covenant or Community Member, or the idea of being the Church of the Covenant. If we do that, we are dead! We are to continually refresh our lives in commitment to and trust in God alone, remaining constantly alive to God's spirit.

One more thing. Isaac represented 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 even clinging to God's blessings and promises stands in the way of our attentiveness to the living God.**

Reading beyond v. 14, we find that Abraham's act of complete and utter faith and trust in God gave a rebirth of God's promise, of the future. God now says to Abraham: "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of the heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore." **Whenever we act out of complete trust in God, willing to let go of attachments, even blessings, we sow the seeds of hope for the future, beyond our seeing.** When we live out of this kind of faith, the decisions, actions, and commitments we make now have an effect on the world in generations to come.

When we read this story in such a light, we begin to hear echoes in Jesus' teachings about discipleship. Being willing to lose our lives in order to find our lives (Matt. 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-9:1; Luke 9:23-27). Being willing to let go of wealth in order to enter God's kingdom (Mk. 10:23ff). And many other places where Jesus talks about letting go of what is dearest to us in order to be alive to God (Lk. 9:57-62; 12:49-53). Sometimes Jesus puts it as bluntly and jarringly as does this story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son. At stake is a spiritual truth at the heart of what it means to live life to the fullest degree.

For all of the difficulties this story may pose for us today, I think it is very important for us. If we are, through out inward journey work, growing in a willingness to let go of our most cherished attachments or addictions or however you want to put it, then we are opening our lives to God alone and the new life that comes from God. Faith is about growing in our capacity to trust in God for who God is, not for what we can get from God. It is about continuing to grow in our capacity to open our lives to the God who is beyond our understanding and grasp, but who seeks to work through us for the wellbeing of God's world.

Well, I don't know whether I hit it, fouled it off, or struck out. I do hope you will see that there are some stories in our spiritual tradition that will not go away. They stretch 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 the incomparable joy and adventure of complete faith and trust.

*I offer this sermon in grateful memory of my teacher, Dr. George W. Coats (1936-2006), Professor of Hebrew Scripture, Lexington Theological Seminary, who taught me how to listen to the truth of stories.*