

June 29, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

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

Genesis 22:1-14 *So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"....*

It would be easy to side-step the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac because of the things in it we may find objectionable. For one thing, we do not need the image of a God who demands the sacrifice of a child. Maybe we should drop this as an outdated and offensive tale. I do believe that there are times when we need to speak against portions of scripture that seem to support violence, intolerance, or a narrow view of God. Scripture is not ultimate. It can point us to God, but God is always beyond and more than scripture.

There is a scene in the movie *A League of Their Own* that I think of every time this story from Genesis 22 comes up in the lectionary. Dottie, the standout catcher for the Rockford Peaches, advises her pitcher on throwing to Dottie's kid sister Kit. Dottie wants to teach Kit humility, and Kit is aching 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 am not ready to throw out this story of Abraham and Isaac. 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 trust God in all things. The idea of God's testing us is an ancient one, and 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 work with our most difficult experiences in ways that bring strength and a deepening of our faith. Looking at experiences as "tests" means asking, "What is this experience teaching me? What am I to learn from this about God, about life, about myself, about the meaning of faith?" Testing transforms faith from an idea in our heads to a way of living trustfully within the concrete, daily realities of our lives.

The idea of God testing Abraham's faith by telling him to sacrifice his son may disturb us. However, in his commentary on Genesis, Claus Westermann informs us that human sacrifice was expressly prohibited in Israel. Then why would God now ask such a thing when God has

already condemned it? Well, the story simply does not answer that question. The story tells us at the beginning that this is a test, implying that God has no intention of letting Abraham go through with it (C. Westermann; also G. Von Rad). Yet the tension is still there. Will Abraham trust God, take God at God's word, when doing so means giving up what is dearest to him?

The story is told in a way that builds up in emotion and tension. Twice the storyteller says that Abraham and his son “walked on together,” slowly, agonizingly toward the place of sacrifice. By the time they arrive, when 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 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 over his son, at the very last instant, the messenger of God holds back Abraham's hand. We begin to see that it is God who stops Abraham's hand. “Do not lay your hand on the boy...for I know know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” Remember that “fearing” God means living first and foremost in reverent awe of the sacred dimension of life. Abraham's willingness to trust God to the point of losing what was most precious is why this story became an indelible part of our spiritual tradition.

On one level, the story probably functioned originally to re-affirm God's rejection of human sacrifice. On another level, it is an unforgettable 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 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 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, leading, and sustenance.

One summer while in seminary, I attended the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in Middlebury, VT. I heard poets talk about the necessity of being willing to “murder your darlings.” 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 what is blocking something more powerful from emerging. Spiritual wisdom tells us that whatever we become attached to blocks our openness to God or to Reality. That's what idolatry is--making something other than God the object of our greatest loyalty and security. God is the mysterious Power of Life calling us to let go, to follow, and to trust.

We know what attachment means with regard to addictions. What we are addicted to dominates our life. It is the same with attachments to people. We cling to others for their love, approval, charisma, 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 in the past. We hang onto painful things—anger, hurt, unhappiness—because, as painful as they are, they give our lives a certain meaning. These are some of our “darlings” we are called to “kill”, to let go of, if we are to experience intimacy with and trust in God.

In our life as the Church of the Covenant, the challenge may come when we become attached to a ministry and its success, so that we stop being responsive to God’s spirit. When we cling to a fixed idea of what we think a mission should be, determined to make it succeed or continue at any cost, we have stopped being open to God’s spirit. We forget that it is about God doing something through us. God may be trying to open a new direction, a new dimension, to our ministry.

Commitment and openness to God’s spirit 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 grow in trustful living, in 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 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, remaining open 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 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. The story reminds us that even seeking and clinging to God’s blessings and promises stands in the way of our attentiveness and faithfulness to the living God.

In this vein, I have been interested in how the greeting “Have a nice day” is being replaced by “Have a blessed day”. It isn't that I don't appreciate the good intentions of those who tell me to have a blessed day. However, I would rather have a faithful day, a day in which I am trying to live moment by moment truly present to my own life, to others, to the world around me, and to God. I would rather have a day filled with the struggle to live trustingly the life of God's love. If I am doing that, I will no doubt find a few blessings along the way.

Reading beyond v. 14, we find that Abraham's act of complete and utter faith and trust in God brought 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 far beyond our own lives.

We hear echoes of these same things in Jesus' teachings about discipleship. Losing, or letting go of, our lives in order to find our true life (Matt. 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-9:1; Luke 9:23-27). Letting go of attachment to wealth and material things 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 jarringly as does this story of Abraham and Isaac. At stake is a spiritual truth at the heart of what it means to live fully, freely, faithfully.

For all of the difficulties of this story, I think it is very important for us. If we are, through our inward journey work, growing in a willingness and freedom 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 continuing 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, that we should not throw out or discount simply because they are difficult or do not fit our current views. They make us go deeper. If we let them, they can open up in our hearts and minds the great mystery and reality of God who loves us and invites us always to live in the incomparable joy and adventure of complete faith and trust.

In grateful memory of my teacher, Dr. George W. Coats (1936-2006), Professor of Hebrew Scripture, Lexington Theological Seminary, who taught me the importance of listening to "story truth".