

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 2, 2023 – The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's Old Testament lesson from the book of Genesis – the Sacrifice of Isaac – has captured the imagination of artists and taken hold of the minds of philosophers and religious thinkers for centuries. This is a story that cannot easily be put out of our minds. It is deeply troubling, from its very beginning: "God tested Abraham." What kind of God "tests" a man by asking him to kill his son, the son he loves? How can we reconcile this lesson with the picture we have in scripture of a loving, merciful God?

We read and hear this ancient biblical account about an event that happened 4,000 years ago from a modern perspective. Today a man who thought that God told him to kill his son and proceeded to carry out that command would be locked away and his son placed where he would be protected. We need to go back in time for a better perspective.

In the ancient near East people made sacrifices to their gods to obtain from the gods some desired outcome – good crops, for example. The more valuable the outcome was to the people, the more valuable the sacrifice offered. Child sacrifice was a practice then, an offering of something of supreme value to obtain from the gods something very important. The Genesis account looks very different if we imagine a perspective in which child sacrifice was an acceptable religious practice.

From that perspective God no longer appears cruelly demanding. Instead, God's mercy and loving kindness take center stage. When Abraham has the knife in his hand, prepared to kill his son, an angel of the Lord stops him. Abraham sees a ram caught in a thicket and offers the ram in place of his son. "So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide.'" Abraham believed that God would provide, and God did provide. God did not require the child's death, but rather Abraham's reverence, respect, and obedience (better translations than "fear"), as befits a created human being to his Creator.

The passage we heard is not, in fact, the end of this story in Genesis. The angel of the Lord went on speaking to Abraham: "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: 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 heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore ... because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:16-18). God blesses Abraham abundantly because of his obedience and his faith. Remember that obedience and faith are about trust in God and God's promises.

I think we can be certain that neither Abraham nor Isaac ever forgot this episode in their lives. I wonder how the memory might have stayed with them and influenced them as the years went on. Was their faith increased? Their love of God strengthened? Though we live now, not 4,000 years ago and won't be "tested" as Abraham was, yet we have all experienced God providing for us when we most needed God. Sometimes we have recognized God's provision immediately, as Abraham did when he saw the ram in the thicket. Sometimes we only recognize how God has provided for us long after our most difficult trials. We often need the perspective of time to see God's mysterious work. I suggest that you spend some time in thought and in prayer to review your life with the goal of identifying the places where the Lord has provided for you. Let the memories build your trust in God and give you hope for the future.

Now let's consider our reading from the Gospel of Matthew. We just heard the end of a chapter in which Jesus gives the disciples missionary instructions. He sends the twelve apostles out among the Jewish people to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, to cast out demons, heal the sick, and raise the dead. He said, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). Jesus taught the disciples to have courage in the face of their persecutors, trusting that God valued them.

Jesus never disguises the fact that being a witness to God's kingdom and a follower of his is costly. Jesus calls us to take up the cross and follow him. This isn't referring to surviving the difficulties we encounter in our lives. It isn't the sort of passive suffering that comes to mind when people say that a particular problem is their "cross to bear." When Jesus bids his followers to take up the cross, he is asking people to voluntarily, willingly offer their lives for God's kingdom, as he does. For most of us, that means a slow process over time of turning away from the demands of self and turning toward God, a slow process of placing love of God above our other loves.

At the end of this morning's lesson Jesus instructs his disciples about rewards. In a different translation, The Common English Bible, which is a bit clearer here, Jesus says: "everybody who gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones because they are my disciples will certainly be rewarded." "Little ones" does not mean only children; it means any ordinary Christian. Jesus identifies the work of giving the necessities of life to other Christians in need as a basic component of following him, something we never "graduate" from in the Christian life.

But a question may come to your mind as it does to mine. Are we only to help other Christians? What about people of other faiths or no religious faith at all? What is our responsibility to them?

As in all questions of theology and faith, we must start from a stance of humility, recognizing that our understanding of God and of how God works in people's lives is quite limited. We believe these propositions: all people are created in the image of God; Christians are called to be witnesses to the fact that God loves the whole world; and God's presence and God's grace are without limit. Our 21st century perspective is global, a perspective much broader than the 1st century author of Matthew's Gospel could possibly have taken. So, I think we may safely conclude that when we serve any human being in need, for the love of God, we are serving Jesus and the one who sent him. And whether our service is received by those we try to help with gratitude or with scorn or is taken for granted and exploited – no matter, for Jesus promises that our reward from God will not be lost.

The Christian life is demanding and challenging, as Jesus said it would be, and it can be a struggle to keep trying to follow Jesus. That's one side of our experience as Christians. On the other hand, we are sometimes blessed with moments of grace and faith when we see how simple the message of Jesus truly is. Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Give up thinking that you know all about God. Let God's love fill your heart to overflowing. Trust God. Learn humility. Thank God for life and all its blessings. Serve the Lord with gladness. By the power of the Holy Spirit we are sometimes able to do these things more simply and easily than we could ever imagine. But whether the road is rough or smooth may we all walk in Jesus' way, loving God and trusting God's promises, now and always. Amen.