

Sermon for June 28, 2020

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon Text: Genesis 22: 1-14 and Matthew 10: 40-42

Sermon Title: "*The Loyalty Test*"

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION:** The relationships and the emotions we cling to define us. Lord, help us examine the things that we keep hidden in our hearts that distance us from our relationship with you. Help us release everything to you, becoming free from the things that weigh us down and help us place our complete trust in you.

**PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION:** God of mercy, your faithfulness to your covenant frees us to live together in the security of your powerful love. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises by living in faith and obedience; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some years ago, one of Dave's old mares cut her hind leg very severely just where the leg joins the hoof. Dave and I did not realize immediately the seriousness of the injury, but the look on the vet's face said it all. The old mare, Amber, was not in a lot of pain, at the moment, she explained, but the spreading infection would soon make it impossible for the horse to walk. We needed to make a decision quickly about whether we wanted to treat Amber or to put her down. The treatment option was not simple. Amber would have to be transported to the veterinary hospital at VPI where she would be immobilized for week while the wound was flushed daily and antibiotics administered. Even then, there was only a small chance that the treatment would work. Given Amber's advanced age and her other health problems, Dave decided to put her down.

This was a horse that Dave had raised from a foal that he had known longer than he had known me! I asked him if he wanted me to walk with Amber and him, from the barn through the woods, to the pasture where the vet was waiting and where Amber would be buried beside her mother. Dave decided that he wanted the opportunity to say goodbye to his good friend by himself. The last image I had of them was Dave leading Amber through the pines, her tail switching back and forth, back and forth, just as they had journeyed hundreds of times before. I couldn't imagine the courage it must have taken Dave, not only to make the decision to spare the horse more suffering, but also to take that walk alone. It's as close as I, who have no children of my own, can come to imagining what might have been in Sarah's heart as Abraham made the journey with Isaac to Moriah.

This is as strange and challenging a story as there is in Scripture. There is no explanation given as to why God commanded Isaac to be sacrificed. Some scholars say that this story should be interpreted as a polemic against child sacrifice, such as that practiced among Israel's pagan neighbors. God does spare Isaac. Others say that as Christians we should be prepared to put God first in our lives, no matter what the cost. But the story doesn't

really support either of these interpretations. Here's what I think we can say about this text.

My understanding of this story comes from the repetition of the word "*provide.*" Through the repetition of this word, we come to appreciate that it is God, rather than Abraham, who has consistently passed the loyalty test with flying colors. Abraham tells his son Isaac: "*God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.*" When God does provide the ram, Abraham names the place "*The lord will provide.*" And lest we miss this important point, we are told that to this day "*On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.*"

A quick review of Genesis indicates that God to date hasn't had much luck with human beings. The first twenty chapters of Genesis reveal a fairly consistent rejection of God. Adam and Eve get thrown out of the garden, a brother murders a brother, the earth becomes a violent place. Even after God's renewed covenant with humankind after the flood, nothing really changes as demonstrated by the Tower of Babel. When God calls Abram in chapter 12 of Genesis, God is trying a different approach. God will work through one man and his descendants to bless all the families of the earth. God makes many promises to Abraham, *and fulfills them*, but Abraham has a few weak moments himself. He sacrificed his wife Sarah without much conscience on at least two occasions. He passed his beautiful wife off as his sister, once in Egypt and once in Canaan, because he was afraid that he would be killed if he could not seduce the foreign kings with Sara's beauty. Rather than trusting her and himself to God's ability to provide for their safety among alien peoples, Abraham uses his wife as a concubine. What a swell guy!

But here's God's problem. God is in a fix because God is bound to Abraham in covenant relationship with the unbreakable bond of God's *hesed*, God's love. Human beings are consistently forgetting that we are a people of covenant, with loyalty to only one God. We regularly sacrifice our innocents to much lesser gods than Yahweh. We lay our sons and daughters on the altar of war. We lay our inner-city youth and rural poor on the altar of educational sub standards. We lay our sons and daughters on the altar of privilege. We lay our elderly on the altar of neglect. We even lay God on the altar of our indifference and busyness.

Because God is faithful, God is vulnerable. The 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Rilke captures this vulnerability when he addresses God in a poem: "*You, neighbor God, if sometimes in the night/I rouse you with loud knowing, I do so; only because I seldom hear you breathe/and know: you are alone. And should you need a drink, no one is there/to reach it to you, groping in the dark./ Always I hearken. Give but a small sign./ I am quite near.*" Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel points out God's vulnerability in another way. If Isaac is sacrificed, then there will be no future generations to whom Abraham can pass on his knowledge of, or faith in, God.

Perhaps this story also shows us that sometimes we have to give back to God what we think ought to belong to us. It's not just children. Matthew's text has Jesus telling us that the love of human family should never supersede our love of God. This is the hard one

for most of us, but I can tell you from experience that the love of family was the most prominent sin in my biological family, which ultimately imploded on itself.

The theologian Paul Tillich gave me insight into how good things, like love of family, can be destructive if it is our first loyalty. Here's the point. God has passed the loyalty test, even sacrificing Jesus for us. Even the best of us aren't loyal consistently to God. Abraham has been faithful, but even he slips up from time, just as we do. God still loves us. This story is about God's love and faithfulness, not our own. If this story prompts us to ask "*What kind of God asks for such a sacrifice,*" our answer must surely be "*a God who loves us and provides for us.*" God will provide. Believe that this is so. Amen.