

Proper 8 2020  
Matthew 10:40-42  
Troubling Messages

Child sacrifice and human sacrifice are soundly condemned elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, e.g. Leviticus and Deuteronomy, psalms 106:37. Why this horrifying ancestral story about Abraham in the reading from Genesis?

About twelve years ago, I saw the 17<sup>th</sup> century Rembrandt painting The Sacrifice of Isaac at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. I was mesmerized by the sheer size – more than six feet tall with the frame around it – and totally repelled by the story it told.

Abraham's face is contorted in near madness, Isaac's hands are bound behind him and he twists, seeking escape. Abraham's large hand covers the boy's upturned face, holding him down and preventing Isaac from screaming or seeing the enormous knife with which Abraham is poised to cut Isaac's throat. An angel hovers above, staying Abraham's arm and forcing the knife to fall. The ram is only vaguely outlined in the bushes.

What father offers his son as sacrifice – and what God tests our faith by demanding that sacrifice? This is child abuse by any measure. Knowing the scripture story, I imagined that Isaac, having survived the encounter, would grow up with a warped, damaged psyche. And Sarah? How did the family survive the betrayal of trust and love?

This ancestral narrative is typically called the 'testing of Abraham', not 'the sacrifice of Isaac'. Different focus, different story. Or is it? We are told in the beginning something Abraham does not know – that the Lord God was testing Abraham. As Abraham and Isaac separate from the two young men who have accompanied them, Abraham says he and Isaac will worship and come back to the group. When Isaac asks about the lamb for the sacrifice, Abraham says, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering.' Was that duplicitous, or genuine faith? Maybe, Abraham understood God *was* testing him, and he was confident that God would intervene and work out an alternative.

In the beginning of the Abraham saga, God asks Abraham to leave his family of origin and travel to a land God would show him, where Abraham would father a great people. Now, Abraham is told to *sacrifice* his future family – his eldest son – on a mountain that God will show him. In the verses beyond today's reading, the angel of the Lord calls to Abraham a second time, saying, because you have not withheld your son, I will bless you. God makes more promises of prosperity and multitudinous offspring.

Some later Jewish traditions hold that Abraham actually *did* sacrifice an obedient Isaac – making both Abraham and Isaac model Jewish martyrs for their obedience to God. In our Christian theology, we tend to skip straight to the cross: God sacrificed his own Son.

20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Martin Buber said that in the Hebrew Scripture, ‘to believe means to follow the will of God.’ These ancestral stories – the going out on Abraham’s great journey, and the extreme of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son-- are about following the will of God.

I wrestle with our understanding – and misunderstanding – of God’s will. Especially when we use “it’s God’s will” to excuse our violence, or colonization/subjugation of others, or we rationalize exclusion. We sacrifice our children’s future by failing to provide adequate education, child care, housing meeting the basic needs of all children. We ignore the contributions of the many DACA immigrants who are now young adults, whose children are US citizens.

At the Hermitage Museum, I turned with relief to the painting across the gallery, Rembrandt’s Return of the Prodigal Son. The father’s joy, the son’s humility. Love. Hospitality at its finest. Come in, be welcome. I thanked God for the gentleness of Jesus, for the compassionate God revealed in Jesus’ life and stories.

Love is not always met with love. In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus speaks to his twelve disciples as he prepares to send them out.

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

Hospitality –our thoughts go immediately to strangers and those in need. We are a church, we welcome everyone. Do we? What do “welcome” and “hospitality” mean in these pandemic times, when our church remains open and our buildings closed?

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

The disciples are sent out “like sheep into the midst of wolves” Matt. 10 – the disciples are in need of hospitality, they are the ones who carry Jesus’ message from God the Father. Will they be welcomed? Or turned away because of who they are? Jesus warns them they may be threatened, bullied, pushed out of town. Not welcomed. Like some of the Black Lives Matter and racial injustice protestors. Anyone see the news photos of police and armed civilians engaging Chaplains on the Harbor?

Jesus tells the disciples to carry no food, no change of clothes, ‘no gold or silver or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff.’ Matt 10: 9-10. They were not famous speakers attending large rallies set up by an advance team, or holding tent meetings – they were the immigrants, the strangers in the towns they visited. Itinerant missionaries whose reward, Jesus says, will be great in the Kingdom of God.

I am a person of privilege - white privilege. White privilege *assumes* welcome. We expect the doors to open. If we are not welcomed, we are angry, challenging; but we are not shamed or turned away because of who we are.

We white folks do not share the experiences of Dale's and my adopted middle son Byron. When Byron was 28, he wrote a poem for Juneteenth, titled *So Many Questions*. In it, he says, '*Never knew I was different until age 12.*' Talking about that poem with him, we heard for the first time about 12 year old Byron retrieving a soccer ball from a neighbor's yard. The neighbor yelled out, 'get your black a\*\* off my property.' Capitol Hill, Seattle.

*"Never knew I was different until age 12". 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.'* I weep for Byron, for that wound carelessly inflicted by a white neighbor. Now, forty years later, I worry about his two sons – our grandchildren. Now in their early teens, their experiences may not be very different.

Byron could have rung the doorbell and asked permission to retrieve the ball, but surely we can correct or disagree without shaming. I wonder why Byron did not *trust* enough to talk about his experience when it happened. That is on us, his parents. And his 5 brothers and sisters who witnessed and found it un-remarkable. Not worth mentioning. Just something that happened.

The thing about being the ones who welcome – the ones who *extend* hospitality or choose not to – is that we remain in nearly absolute control of the situation. This is a crucial point. I welcome you into *my home*, (or my church!) I expect you to meet my rules, accept my hospitality, and leave when I ask. In other words, to meet *my terms* of our relationship. There is no reciprocity in that context.

Historically, white privilege decides who gets to enter our country, where the immigrants will go and live and work, and how long they will stay.

We the privileged, the ones for whom doors are already opened, must bring our spiritual *imagination* and our spiritual discipline to explore how it really is for ones who need to be welcomed. Because it is not our experience. In our *naivite*, we may find incidents of exclusion un-remarkable. Not worth mentioning. Something that just happens.

Now, we have a unique opportunity to be the refugees, the immigrants. To be the ones who wait to be welcomed, to shop, to eat in restaurants, to gather as church. Right now, we are isolated, separated, shut off from gathering in any group of size and even having guests in our homes.

We are unable to be the ones who welcome others.

What does it feel like? What can we learn? How do we live in this tension of hospitality?

Jesus says *compassionate welcome* is hospitality in God's spirit of mercy.

Re-opening our church for public worship presents a myriad of hospitality issues. We cannot seat our usual congregation with social distancing, even outside on our lawn. We can seat only 24. That's the size and shape of our space. Do we still say, 'all are welcome?'

How do we decide who *is* welcome? How will we ensure room for a stranger or two to worship with us? We are not the gatekeepers of the community of God.

How will *you* feel when you can only enter if you are wearing a mask and stay at least 6 feet away from all others? What if you do not like wearing a mask, or disagree that is necessary? Will you be angry or accommodating for the sake of others? What if you are turned away because you have a fever or attended a gathering the day before at which social distancing was not observed? What will it *feel like* to sign a risk-disclosure and contact tracing document every time you enter for worship?

What does it feel like to be the immigrant, the refugee, the stranger, for whom the door may -- or may not -- be opened?

Our desire to bar the door to others is a hope for security in our lives. We are sadly naive if we think these issues will be emotionally easy for us to experience. Let us rest in and ponder our discomfort.

Maybe, all of us wearing masks will be a leveler of sorts -- it will be harder, from our 6 ft of distance -- to recognize others. Will we even know who the strangers among us are?

Our Gospel lesson today: the strangers, the immigrants, who come to us carry Jesus' message to us, rather than the other way around.

Amen

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