Sacrifice

March 12, 2006 (Lent 2, Year B)

Genesis 22:1-14 Psalm 16 Romans 8:31-39 Mark 8:31-38

Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

Sacrifice has become a popular word. It is a word our president used repeatedly this summer as the death toll mounted in Iraq. Sacrifice is a word used at work, and used with families. People are asked to make sacrifices for their employers, and for their families. We are asked to sacrifice our time, our money, and sometimes our lives.

Sacrifice is a gruesome, violent word, a word of power. Behind this word lie thousands of years of blood-stained altars dedicated to thousands of gods. Offerings of grain, of doves, of lambs, and yes, in some cultures and some times, children.

It is not a word we should use lightly, so when I hear on the news that some people are being asked to make a sacrifice, I always have to ask, **who** are we being asked to sacrifice *to*? To whom are we being asked to sacrifice?

We worship God alone –we do not worship country or family, or even church. We worship God. We cannot in good conscience sacrifice to any *thing*, any god or people or idea or principality, but only to God. We present ourselves to the God of love, who does not demand the blood of children or the incense of burnt offerings. But for thousands of years, we have wrested with the idea of sacrifice.

We have two violent and often misread readings today; I believe we have to address them together, because taken together, they can either give us great strength or do us great harm. Too often, churches have preached this Gospel –deny yourself and take up your cross – to mean: Destroy any sense of your self that you have, burn away everything that God made unique about you. But this is the Gospel of Mark -- a gospel filled with feasting and fellowship, a gospel filled with a strong call to justice for the suffering.

Joanna Dewey makes a convincing case that Jesus is asking his followers to break free from the control of family and state, village and empire, culture and cross:[1]

For Mark, writing at a time when the basic unit of identity was not the individual but the family, to deny your self is to break away from the ties of family and culture, kinship and class.

And to take up the cross is a *political statement* -- to endure the crucifix, the punishment meted out by the Roman Empire against dissenters. Jesus is not exhorting suffering in general, but to be willing to be persecuted by society and to endure punishment from the state, even death,as we live the call to God's justice, so that human suffering might end. *So that human suffering might end.*

And then there is the "Binding of Isaac," this nightmarish episode in the Book of Genesis. It is a key, foundational text to all three Abrahamic religions – to Judaism and Christianity and Islam, all of whom share this story (although in Islam, it is Abraham's first son, Hagar, who goes with him to the mountain). The standard reading of the story is this: God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his child. Abraham passed the test by showing that he was willing to kill his own son (slipping away without talking to Sarah, Isaac's mother, Abraham's wife) in order to obey God. And God shows that God is merciful, by stopping Abraham before he carried out this filicide.

It's a terrifying story. It a theology that places law over grace, doctrine over the welfare of the innocent; a theology, if I may be so bold to

[1] Biblical Theology Bulletin, Fall, 2004, www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LAL/is_3_34/ai_n6260526

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comment on a sister church, that has echoes in the Archdiocese's decision to end their adoption program all together rather than let needy children be cared for by loving, gay parents.

But there are, thank God, other interpretations of this story. Here's one: Abraham was testing God, to see if God was like the other deities of the region, delighting in human sacrifice.

Here's another: God was testing Abraham, and Abraham failed. The right answer, the kind of answer headstrong Moses would have given, was to tell God: "No." The right answer would be for Abraham to say what the rest of our scriptures repeat over and over.

No, you are a God of mercy and justice, and not a God who desires blood offerings, not a God who calls for death, for the destruction of the innocent. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells a crowd that loving God and loving neighbor "is more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices" *(Mark 12:33).*

750 years before Jesus, the prophet Amos wrote that God declared "Though you offer me burnt offerings...I will not accept them.... but let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream" *(Amos 5:24).*

Justice. Righteousness. Love. This is the sacrifice that our God is seeking. It's icon hangs here in our church, Jesus not condemned to suffer eternally, but risen, victorious and complete.

To sacrifice -- It is a bloody image, but the word in English is a lovely and complex one. It does not mean, in its origin, to destroy or burn or lose. It means **to make holy.** To sacrifice, to sanctify, to make holy.

Pick up your cross, make your life holy, offer your whole self, your cares and joys, your strength and your and suffering, offer them up to God – not for destruction, but for justice, for righteousness, for love.

If you are called by God to give your time don't destroy yourself through exhaustion, but lift up that time to God, and know that time to be holy time, sacred.

If you are called by God to care for someone, don't destroy yourself through that care. *don't destroy yourself through that care.* Lift that care up to God, and know it to be holy, know your hands to be holy because they do God's work, know your heart to be holy, because it beats in time with God's love.

Let God care for your heart and your hands and keep you safe, because God has made you holy; you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever.

And when we gather around this table to celebrate the life and death and resurrection of Christ, come forward to present your whole self, your true self, which **no one else can claim,** come forward to present your whole self to God who loves you without ceasing,

For we are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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