

Tested

The Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Father's Day
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
June 16, 2019
Text: Genesis 22:1-14

This text we read this morning is one of the most significant, most foundational and most controversial in all of the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The reason for this is the nature of the story itself. It is quite simply horrific. God, the same God at least theoretically, we think we know to be loving and merciful orders Abraham to kill his only legitimate son on an altar at a holy place as a burnt offering sacrifice to God. What. The. Heck. It's no wonder that readers and interpreters of this dark text have for millennia found it to be confusing and incomprehensible, to say the least. It quite literally raises more questions than it answers. The fact that it has always garnered such intense scrutiny and generated so much thoughtful reflection is what puts it front and center as we ponder the nature of God and God's relationship with the humans whom God created.

In Judaism, this story is known as the *Akedah*, or the story of the binding of Isaac. The traditional Jewish understanding of this story is that it was a test of Abraham's willingness to obey God's commands no matter what. God was being God and as such, God had every right to order Abraham to do whatever God felt was warranted, even sacrificing his only son. What matters about this

story, in other words, is that Abraham was willing to bind Isaac and sacrifice him, trusting that God had a reason even for this horrendous and cruel request. That God intervened at the last moment to save Isaac from the knife and provide the ram for sacrifice is a sign of God's profound, never ending mercy. Some Jewish traditions take the story even further, insisting that God does not intervene and the sacrifice of Isaac is completed, with Isaac a willing participant, making both of them supreme examples of obedience and trust in God to the point of martyrdom.

In the Christian tradition, some evangelicals see in Isaac a sort of precursor to Jesus – the innocent son given over to sacrifice for the well-being of others. Here again, both Abraham and Isaac are seen as supreme examples of what it means to trust God and obey even those commands of God which seem heartless and perhaps even evil. 19th century Christian theologian and existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard made this story the focal point of one his seminal works – *Fear and Trembling*. In this book he poses the question, if God asks you to do something you believe to be wrong, do you have to do it? In other words, he questions what happens when divine order and human moral intellect intersect. He argues that humans have a responsibility to ask that question of themselves and of God. Ultimately, though, he believes that God's authority is the final one. In other words,

one must have faith that in the end God knows what God is doing in any given situation, because God is God. This requires faith which is not and cannot be grounded in a person's rational mind which will always want to believe it has the answer.

Islam also sees this story as an important one, again because of the faith, trust and obedience of Abraham to God. Interesting to note, though, is that in the Qur'an it is Ishmael and not Isaac who is the son bound to be sacrificed. You will recall that Ishmael was Abraham's first son by Sarah's maid Hagar when Sarah was thought to be childless. After Isaac was born to Sarah, she insisted that Abraham send away both Hagar and Ishmael, which he did, seemingly without question. Again, in this situation, he literally sacrificed one son to favor the other. Perhaps this is why in the Qur'an, Abraham in fact completes the sacrifice of Ishmael with Ishmael as a willing participant, trusting that this is God's will for reasons neither of them could possibly understand.

No matter how you want to think about it, there is no doubt that this is a really tough story for any of us who think we know about our loving God to understand. Why does an all knowing, all loving God feel the need to test Abraham's faith in such a cruel way? What is the real point of this story? Why did the ancient scribes of Israel feel this story – confusing and horrific as it is – belonged in the Torah, the sacred writings of Israel? Is it about obedience to God no matter what? Is it about faith in God no

matter what? Is it about trusting God to provide an alternative when things seem their bleakest? Is it about hope that God knows what God is doing, hope that God is always just and loving and kind, even when it appears to us mere mortals to be otherwise?

Honestly, nobody really knows the answers to those questions as they arise from this story and perhaps that's the point. Nobody knows why the ancient decision was made to include it in the book of Genesis. Contemporary biblical scholars argue that ancient readers of the text just didn't see it as that extraordinary, that horrendous, of a story since human sacrifice was not unknown in the ancient world. They reason this story is actually intended to show that God opposes human sacrifice because even though God initially orders it of Abraham, God intervenes at the last moment, providing a ram instead. This is why the story begins with the explanation that God tested Abraham. It's also why in the middle of the story as Abraham and Isaac leave the two men accompanying them to proceed to the location for the sacrifice, Abraham tells them "*we* will return to you here." But again, who knows? Frankly, there are almost as many explanations for this story as there are people who have read it and sorting through them all to come to some conclusion is not why I chose this text as our focal point for today.

Nope, I chose this text for today, Father's Day Sunday, because it's about a father – Abraham, and what God asked of

him. God asked him to sacrifice his son. In this story, I see more than a horrific story about blood sacrifice be it animal or human – both equally reprehensible to me. I see in this story the simple truth that God always requires fathers, and mothers, to sacrifice their sons and daughters – but on the altar of life rather than one made of stone and wood. What do I mean by that? Well, every father knows what it’s like the first time you see one of your kids drive off in the family car ALONE to run an errand or meet friends. Doesn’t matter where they are going or why. What matters in that moment is that the dad *knows* the dangers waiting around every corner as that child drives out of sight. It is gut wrenching, to put it mildly. It feels like your four year old is driving away. Until they pull back in the driveway safe and sound, dad is convinced (whether he’ll admit it or not) he just might not see that son or daughter again. Oh, he’ll say he trusts him/her. He’ll tell everyone what an excellent driver he/she is. But deep down inside, it feels like he just sent this kid off to some horrific end. Dads – moms too – tend to forget that “first time behind the wheel alone” feeling. It does get a little better each time after that until within a few weeks or months, it’s just about gone and all you are is glad someone else is available to run one of those ceaseless errands.

But that first-time driving moment isn’t the only time that feeling of sacrificing one’s child rears its head. What about

leaving them at sleep-away camp or college or basic training for the first time? Entrusting this huge piece of your life to someone else to take care of? It is SO hard in those moments just to *let go* of that child, isn't it? You know they will be fine. You know you've done everything you can to prepare them for whatever is they must now face without you. But still, it can be a gut punch in that moment – especially as they run off smiling right toward whatever it is lying ahead of them, leaving you standing behind watching them go, waiving and praying to God to keep them safe and ever so slightly afraid of what will happen. That, dear friends, is surely an Abraham and Isaac moment.

Thankfully, I also see in this story some great advice for dads in their relationship with their kids, no matter what age they are. First, like Abraham, dads should be strong and consistent role models of what it means to be a person of faith, a person of clear moral resolve, a person of courage and strength. Children, no matter their age, will respond much more to what they see and experience with their fathers than they will to words uttered. Second, like Abraham, fathers need to decide what the role of faith is in their lives and then act accordingly in every aspect of life, including interactions with family. Abraham's unerring, unwavering faith in God and trust in the hope God could and would do the impossible determined every aspect of Abraham's life. Again, what children see in their parents and how they live

life each day is what will guide them in the present and the future more than anything else ever could.

Finally, there is one more lesson we can find for ourselves in the story of Abraham and, while it applies equally to fathers and mothers, in my experience this is an issue that dads tend to struggle with a lot. I saw it in my own dad and I see it in Peter. So, here it is. Don't try to fix everything for your kids because you'll never be able to. Life just doesn't work that way. And you already know that the best way for kids to learn how to fix things for themselves is to fix things for themselves by themselves, perhaps with you on the sidelines, or maybe not. This involves a whole lot of trust – trust in your kids and their abilities and trust that God is with them, no matter what. If they don't succeed in fixing it, God will be there to help them pick up the pieces and you can be too, if they want you there. Trust that if they do succeed the first time, God will be there to guide them forward to the next step. This is, I think, what Abraham knew about God, trusted about God, that we struggle with so mightily. Trust in God is simply trusting – in God. You either do, or you don't. There's no half way, although I admit that's where most of live – myself included – most of the time. It's okay. God understands that too.

So, to all you dads here today – Happy Father's Day! To all those dads smiling down on us from heaven – Happy Father's

Day! We miss you. We love you. We are so grateful for all you did for us, all you meant to us.

Before I end this Father's Day message, I also want to offer a thought to everyone here who did not have a father who warranted a "Happy Father's Day" wish. I am so sorry you've had to live with that empty spot in your life. I hope that God put another man – a teacher, a pastor, a mentor – in your life who was able to fill that gap, only if just a bit. I hope that person was a man of strength, faith and courage for you to look up to, admire and imitate.

For all of us here today on this Father's Day Sunday, if nothing else touches your heart this morning, please remember – hold on to with all your strength and might, hope and heart – that our God who is mother and father to us all, loves you more than words can say, more than there are stars in the sky, more than there are grains of sand on the beach. You are *that special* to God. You always have been and you always will be. Amen.