

Giving All to God
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Seventh Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 8, Year A, RCL
June 29, 2008

Every once in a while, a Sunday arrives where the appointed lectionary readings just don't seem to mesh, or they just seem to bother you as the preacher—or you just don't know what to do with them. Count this as one of those Sundays for me, folks. I usually feel called to preach on the gospel, and this Sunday's is hardly too difficult, with its focus on hospitality and receiving God and those whom God has sent. All well and good—after all, the Episcopal Church's slogan is “The Episcopal Church welcomes you!” And we do try very hard to do that well here at Grace Church—and if we haven't, please let us know so we can improve!

But then there's the Genesis reading, the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Issac. It disturbs me, it nags at me, and so I feel compelled to explore it. This story of God's command seems so out of character for the God we know—or want to know. Here is Abraham, supposedly about 100+ years old, and his son Issac—the son God promised Abraham, the son from whom Abraham's name would be carried on. This son, his legitimate heir, is his one and only child with his wife Sarah, and there is a lot riding on his continued existence. After all, if something happened to Issac, then poof! where would this promised family line come from?

So it strikes me, a 21st century American mom, as just plain odd—even twisted—that Abraham would so obediently follow God's command to offer Issac as a burnt offering on a mountain in Moriah. I do realize that there were religions at that time where human sacrifice may have been part of the practice, and so perhaps it didn't strike Abraham as unusual. But this is the God with whom Abraham has had an intimate relationship, even arguing with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. And yet as concerned as Abraham was with the few righteous in among the

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wicked in those cities, he said not a peep when God gave this command to offer his son as a sacrifice. However, it must have disturbed him deeply, for he did not tell anyone about God's command even as he prepared to carry it out. He couldn't even bring himself to tell his son the full truth—though it must have been evident to Issac when he was bound and laid on the altar. *“Uh, Dad, hey Dad, what's going on? We're looking for a sheep, not me!”* Talk about trauma!

I doubt I would have been so obedient or stoic as Abraham—in fact, I can guarantee it. My relationship with our Lord is very much like that of parent and child (toddler or teen, I haven't decided)—I question, I ask, I plead, and yes, I can whine. And most of all, I can get quite, well, cranky. There are those who may say that we shouldn't get mad at God—after all, God knows best (and God does), or they fear God will strike them down if they argue with their Lord. My answer to that is: God is a big guy, He can take it. And so there are times I have vigorously argued with my Lord, thrown the occasional adult temper tantrum, railed at the heavens.

So I imagine that if such a command had been given to me, that would have been my response: *“You want me to do what? You just gave me this son, you promised that a long line of family heirs would come from Issac—a nation, kings of peoples! And now you just want me to take him up to some mountain and kill him? Use him as a burnt offering? For what purpose? And so explain to me then, where is this long line of heirs going to come from? Huh? You told me it was okay to send off Ishmael, that Issac was the one with whom your covenant would be made, and now you're getting rid of Issac too? Do you not care about my feelings, or Sarah's—why*

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are you doing this to us? No, no way, not unless you give me some more information here.....I'm waiting...?"

No, hardly an obedient or trusting response would be forthcoming on my part—which is probably why Abraham is the example of faithful obedience—and I am not.

And that is, in the end, the whole point of the story. Abraham may have felt all the things I gave voice to, and yet, he obeyed. He trusted that God would fulfill God's promises, that somehow God would make it right. He did not flinch, he did not stall for time, he made no excuses. In the end, his trust in God was justified; for God stayed his hand and provided a ram for the burnt offering instead of his beloved son. Abraham had demonstrated his obedience, his love and his trust in God, withholding nothing from God.

But what do we withhold from God? Some may say that we withhold money, not paying a full tithe; others may say time—not praying or attending worship or volunteering as we should. Good answers, but only scratching the surface. What about our very selves—our anger, our disappointment, our confusion—those parts of us that we would choose to 'hide' from God, covering them over and trying to present our best 'face' to God? God already knows all those feelings we carry inside—the pain, the shame, the fear. And God stands ready to help us deal with all those things—loving us no matter how deep the wounds are, or how dark the inner recesses of our hearts seem. *'Come, and let us sort this out together', God says—'there is no need to hide from me. Nothing you can do or say will change my love for you.'*

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And it is in allowing ourselves to fully known that we find the capacity for an honest and intimate relationship with our Creator—a relationship grounded in faith and trust in God’s promises. We learn, as Abraham did, that even those difficult and confusing times are not without God’s presence; that God’s promises are sure, even when they seem impossible. That God’s word is true; even when God asks us to do or say some uncomfortable things, or go some place we rather not go.

God’s prophets and Jesus’ disciples know all about those uncomfortable words, those difficult places. Today’s gospel is the ending of Jesus’ ‘sending out’ speech to his disciples, his instructions before they were sent out to do the difficult job of spreading the Good News, and sharing in Jesus’ healing ministry. We, as members of the body of Christ, are asked to continue that ministry of sharing and reconciliation and healing even today, in our own lives and the lives of those around us. And Jesus promises those who receive Jesus’ followers that they too shall be blessed, as they open their hearts or minds or even their water pitchers to those who come to them in Jesus’ name. For in opening ourselves fully to God, and sharing ourselves with others, we expand the circle ever wider, calling more persons into an intimate relationship with God—a relationship where we are always fully known—and always completely welcome.

Let us begin today to examine what we withhold from God, and resolve to let it go. It will not be an easy journey, but then again, nothing worthwhile ever is. It is then, and only then, that we will truly be free to say “Here I am” when God calls our name.

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Amen.