

Dangerous Relationship

Rob Gieselmann, Pent. 8A, June 29, 2014

Pastor William Willimon talks about the time he showed a film dramatizing the sacrifice of Isaac at Moriah – Afterwards, he asked the mixed audience, that included children, *What does the word, “sacrifice,” mean?* A six year old raised her hand – *My parents are doctors, she said, and some Saturdays I have to go to daycare, so they can help sick people.* Well – that is a type of *sacrifice*, but only in the contemporary sense – not in a religious sense – so Willimon tried to make his point a different way: *Aren’t we put off by the primitive notion that God might ask someone to sacrifice a child?* A middle-aged woman raised her hand and said, *But God still does that. God called my son to Lebanon to be a missionary, taking my new grandson with him.* The group grew silent, and a young father raised his hand: *I’ve got to find another church.* He said. *My family and I.* Willimon was aghast: *What? Why? Because – when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel like I’m near a real God, not the dignified, businesslike God we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham’s God could blow a person to bits, give and then take a child, ask everything from a person and still want more. I want to know that God.*

Wasn’t it Jesus, who said - we heard it just last week - *Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me ... ?* In our polite, dignified and Episcopal world, we package Jesus’ statement as *hyperbole*, but if Abraham is to be believed, God means business. But we think like 21st century Americans. Our 21st century God would not demand human sacrifice, *hardly* any *sacrifice* at all. *But* this story is not what it appears. It is not about killing or abuse in the name of God. It does not portray a God who demands human sacrifice or thrives on violence. If anything, this story is the opposite: perhaps a polemic against child sacrifice that was rampant in the day. But it probably isn’t even that. You see, we forget this story is religious. It is about God, and God’s relationship to human beings. Particularly, the story speaks to the intimate relationship and intercourse between God and Abraham, and by extension, between God and you.

God as force in your life can be powerful, even explosive, to bits. And the question is, what does this God demand of you? ...Beyond passive worship? Maybe you recall the context – God promised Abraham so many descendents that they would outnumber the stars. Abraham *clung* to this promise, but he doubted the means of its accomplishment. He and Sarah were too old; she was *way* past menopause. But Isaac - the miracle child – was born to Sarah anyway. Pure gift – and now God demands Isaac back.

The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, Blessed be the name of the Lord.

What I don’t understand was, why Abraham passive? We know Abraham wasn’t a wimp – In one scene, he tricked a foreign ruler, and in another, he argued with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. But now that his own son’s life is at

stake, Abraham took to silence. Or so it seems – But Abraham understood the nature of God. That God doesn't make hollow promises. And he *knew*, ...Scripture says elsewhere,... *God* could raise Isaac from the dead, if necessary.

Powerful God. Blow to bits, and reconstruct. So when Isaac turned to his father, and asked, *Where is the animal for sacrifice?*, Abraham said sardonically, *God will provide*. You think God was testing Abraham – but here – Abraham was testing God. *God will provide*. Put another way, *I dare you, God – not to provide*.

Even the young man in William Willimon's church understood instinctively God and God's love to be *dangerous*. To access God's love you have to risk everything – But God risks everything, too –

* At baptism, parents are asked, *Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life?* The question sounds like the priest is asking parents whether they will bring their child to church every Sunday. She isn't. The priest is inviting the parents to join with Abraham at Moriah in donating their beloved to God. Trust in God. Baptism: the Moriah moment.

I don't know a single parent who hasn't answered the priest's question, *pro forma*. *We will*. But I wonder, what if parents truly understood what it means to have this extraordinary, powerful and yet loving God explosive in their child's life? Would they – should they – say these words for their child? Should they argue with God? Or should they trust God so radically, they back God into a corner? Like Abraham: *God will provide*. God is dangerous, and the only path to the fulfillment of God's promise to you is sacrifice

– Now at this point – I thought about talking about how parents *do* sacrifice their children, but for the sake of their own dreams – Parents project their own angst or failure or inadequacies onto their children – driving their children to perform, to excel – the best schools, best grades, constant activities – over-scheduling – But I'd say, trust God: let children be children. But this Abraham/God story is about far more than how we raise our children. It is about living in precarious and risky relationship with a dangerous God, a God who is nonetheless bounded by love. This God demands of that you sacrifice everything: your liberal viewpoints for the conservative, and your conservative viewpoints for the liberal. This God demands that prejudiced people give up their prejudice, because that hate destroys. This God demands forgiveness – that you forgive others, not just expecting God to forgive you. So if you think you can approach this God with anything but sacrifice – you're mistaken. *Will you see that the child you present is raised in Christian faith and life?* What is the answer for yourself?

As for me, the only palatable answer is: *I will*.