

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH | Scripture & Sermon
June 28, 2020 – Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: Right Worship

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ~*Micah 6*

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 22: 1-14 (NRSV)

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.”

Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.

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?”

Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!”

And he said, “Here I am.”

He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

SECOND LESSON: Matthew 10: 40-42

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

REFLECTION: “Oh Dem Golden Slippers!”

I am talking with Grace. We are sitting in her room at her long term care facility. She knows who I am today. She knows I am a man of the cloth. Today she is glad to see me. “This one is one of the good ones,” she tells her personal support worker, “but most of them are not worth the collar around their neck. Do you know what some of them do to children when they are alone with them? Do you know what they did to my daughter?”

Grace grabs my hands and leans forward, peering intently into my eyes, searching me, examining my soul. “All I wanted was my crown, and my pair of golden slippers,” she swears. “I wanted to sit at the right hand of God with Jesus and the heavenly choir. I wanted to hear the music.

“But what I did to my daughter. Even when she told me, I didn’t listen. I kept sending her back. And they destroyed her.

“Oh why, oh why, oh why, oh why, oh why. . . .” Grace makes a fist, sticks it in her mouth, and forcibly tries to calm herself down.

“All for my crown,” she confesses, “and that pair of golden slippers.”

Grace was having a bad day. I had been her minister for half a decade. I had buried her husband. I had accompanied her and her family as she transitioned from her beloved dairy farm to this long term care facility. Even before the Alzheimer’s set in however, it was her beloved daughter, who haunted her. She had thought she and her husband had been so progressive allowing her to become an altar girl. She had been so proud seeing her daughter standing up with the priest every Sunday helping out with the mass. She had thought that it was what the Lord required. But her pride had blinded her. And when the sexual assault started, and her daughter came to her, she had refused to listen to her daughter. She had slapped her, and washed her mouth out with soap, and pushed her back into the church kicking and screaming. And her beautiful daughter shriveled up before her. She stopped eating. And then, there was the morning she was not in her room, and they found her hanging from the black walnut behind the calf barn.

“I sacrificed her. I did what I wanted. I did what I thought I needed to do to be great in the eyes of God. Oh why, oh why, oh why, oh why, oh why!”

The story of Grace and her daughter is a difficult one. It is hard to hear. And yet, I bring it up today, because of our reading about Abraham and Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, in the name of God. Many of us, when we read about Abraham and what Abraham is prepared to do to with that knife to his son Isaac, simply won’t believe it. We can’t believe it. We refuse to believe that there is anything true in the story. And, if we do decide to pay attention to the story, we frame it in such a way that it becomes a myth about the greatness and perfection of Abraham’s faith.

What we most definitely do not want to talk about is how, in the name of our faith, over and over again we make mistakes. How, in thinking that what we are doing is what the Lord requires, we can so easily blunder. And how, too often our blunders offer up our young people as sacrificial lambs.

Earlier this week I received a late night phone call from a doctoral student I know only slightly through friends. She lives a thousand miles away, and she reached out to me, distraught, incandescent with rage and sorrow, because she could not think of anyone else to talk to. Her marriage to her wife was unravelling. She felt abandoned. She told me that she was absolutely alone. But it was not her disastrous marriage that had wounded her. After we had talked for a long time about the trauma of her separation from her wife, she had settled down somewhat, and then blurted out her searing truth: “You know Robert, this is all about when I was 17. This is all

about when my parents told me that my being queer was incompatible with their Christian faith. This is all about suddenly finding that I was no longer welcome in the very place that I should have felt safe: my church and my home. Do you know how terrible it was to wander the streets alone at 17? Do you know how dangerous it was? Well, that's where I am again. I am 48 years old. I am an expert in my field. I fly all over the world to talk about stigma and harassment in the workplace from a feminist, queer, postmodern perspective, and here I am, lost and frightened, blubbering away on the phone to some guy I hardly know because I have been abandoned again. I'm like a lost lamb again. And you know what Robert, I am absolutely terrified. Again. I tell you, this is my dark night of the soul. And you know what? I don't think it will ever end."

Now, I know this woman's parents. They are friendly people. They are the kind of people who, if you met them, you would say would never hurt a fly. They are what I would call "Good Christian people." And yet, these delightful Christian people, did a horrible thing many years ago to their daughter with effects that continue to ripple through time.

This week, I have been thinking about why these parents did such a terrible thing. And I have been thinking about why Grace gave up her daughter to the priest. And, I have been thinking about why Abraham almost killed his son.

If Abraham is a myth, we do not have to worry about this question. We can say that the incident never happened. And yet, increasingly, Biblical scholars are coming to understand that there are particular things about the Abrahamic cycle that make it being just a myth extremely difficult to swallow.

For example, archeologists have discovered that many mountaintops in the Holy Land have the remains of altars dedicated to the God of Abraham, and remains of offerings human and animal. We know that the land of Ur where Abraham was born and raised, with its pyramids, its sophisticated priestly class, and many Gods, was a culture steeped in the practice of human sacrifice.

Now there are many complicated theories about why sacrifice occurs. But there is also a simple explanation that accounts for why we sometimes do terrible things in the name of God. Why we do, as Peter says, the thing we hate. This is tradition. Peer pressure. Systems and ways of being that we have difficulty escaping from.

When Yahweh calls to Abraham from out of the blue and asks him to leave Ur and wander about the desert looking for the Promised Land, it was not the physical journey that was difficult. What was difficult was leaving behind the old ways. Everyone else was sacrificing their first born, so why wouldn't Abraham's wonderful new God expect him to do the same?

In Quebec in the 1940s and 1950s every family sent one of their sons to seminary to become a priest, and many men who most certainly should not have been priests found themselves living lives of enforced chastity. Terrible lives. In the 1960s Grace was pressured to have her daughter serve as an altar girl. Maybe it was one of those priests who encountered Grace's daughter. My lesbian friend had parents who no doubt were pressured to expel their daughter from their home. What the Lord requires, is often what our culture requires. To have the strength to resist that temptation to fit in, and conform is not for the faint of heart.

Marguerite VanDies, an influential Canadian church historian at Queen's once told me about how during the First World War, Methodist churches in Canada – and particularly Loyalist country – became recruitment centres for soldiers. If you were a good God-fearing Methodist, all you had to do was go to church and take your son. After the service, in the narthex, a recruiting officer would be seated – and you could send your son off to war for King and Country and God

and death right there. And, as the body counts went up, so did the plaques at the back of the church, extolling this perfect sacrifice with the words inscribed on them – the glorious dead.

Oscar Wilde once wrote, after he had been betrayed by his lover,

*Each man kills the thing he love,
By each let this be heard.
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word.
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*

There are systems at work around us, pressuring us to do what God does not require. These systems are propped up by tradition, years of experience, and sometimes even by the way that we choose to understand scripture. There are ways, for instance that reading about the sacrifice of Isaac which can prop up some very destructive behaviours, and blind us to what we are truly doing.

I know that the parents of my friend -- so alone and so broken – did what they did with regards to their daughter because they were afraid of being abandoned by their own friends and faith community.

These systems can rob us of our crown and golden slippers, however. Today neither my lesbian friend nor her family are happy about what happened in the name of faith. Not one of them is walking in a pair of golden slippers.

What does the Lord require of us? Micah says, “To love justice, to do mercy and walk humbly with our Lord.” Worship – proper worship – the worship that God loves is to simply come before God as we are. We don’t need a sacrifice. If there is to be a sacrifice, the sacrificial lamb is something that God, not us, will provide.