

Sermon for Sunday, June 29, 2008

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

By Rev Tim Ljunggren

1st Lesson: Genesis 22: 1-14

2nd Lesson: Romans 6: 12-23

Gospel: Matthew 10: 40-42

What do you love most in your life? What's the one thing that you refuse to live without? What's important to you? What's crucial to your well-being? What makes you happy? What causes you joy?

Think about those questions for a moment, and then ask yourself this question: "what would I say, what would I do, if God asked me to give that thing up?"

Today's lessons deal with *sacrifice*, a harsh word that stings the ears and freezes the heart, doesn't it?

We don't do well with sacrifice, do we? We live in a society where all of our needs can be met in the blink of an eye—or so we're told. We expect a lot, we crave a lot, we demand a lot.

True happiness can only be mine when all of our needs are met, right? How can I be happy if God demands a sacrifice from me?

Sacrifice. What a molten word, for it burns to the core of us and makes us uneasy. We really don't know what to expect when we hear the word, and after reading the lessons for today, our fear grows even larger, doesn't it?

We start out with that story from Genesis where God tested Abraham. Wow. What's that all about?

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.

Surely, God was joking, right? Yes, yes—God was simply pulling Abraham's leg. A cosmic joke—no more, no less. What kind of a God would demand the sacrifice of an innocent young man? What kind of a God would force a father to serve his beloved son up as a burnt offering?

Here's the hard part of this whole story—God was deadly serious. Abraham knew it. So do we, even when we dismiss this story as simply drama gone wild.

But do you know what the scariest part of this whole story is?

Abraham obeyed:

So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

Whoa. Oh, my God.

How many of us gathered here this morning would have done that? If we were convinced that God was talking to us, and God asked us to kill a loved one—well, in a court of law, maybe we could get away with a defense of insanity, right? Paranoid schizophrenia?

And yet, here God was, testing Abraham by asking him to kill his beloved son.

And Abraham obeyed.

No wonder the word "sacrifice" scares us.

No wonder we're so afraid of what God will ask us to do, especially after a story like this one.

What kind of a God would demand such a sacrifice?

Yet something happens in this story that's easy to miss. Something happens in this story that presents itself as, if not an answer, then as a road to an answer.

"Sacrifice" to God never means giving something up to be lost forever; instead, "sacrifice" means giving in to God and being changed by the experience. When we sacrifice to God, we are sacrificing our old ways of being and doing and thinking and taking on a new cloak of holiness that allows us to be more attuned to God's will in our lives. And with that realization comes another:

God will provide.

Abraham certainly came to that particular realization, didn't he? Just as he was about to slit his beloved son's throat, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, giving him both his son back and an unshakable faith.

Sacrifice. Not giving something up, but simply giving in to God's call to us.

For us, for this community, for each and every one of us gathered here this morning, sacrifice can mean only one thing: welcoming God into our midst by becoming a welcoming people. That's exactly what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel lesson, you know: to sacrifice our pettiness, our need to be right, our need to point out another person's perceived failures, our need for smugness in our own righteousness, our need to cover our pain with anger, our need to control God and others—when we sacrifice those things, then we become

a welcoming people in the name of Christ. When we become a welcoming people, our idea of God expands and we're able to overcome any difficulty, any misunderstanding, and any other folly that we put upon ourselves.

That's the only kind of sacrifice acceptable to God, because in that kind of sacrifice, we're giving up our bad behaviors and opening our hearts to the One who can fill them with love and grace. When we obey God, we can't help but become a welcoming people...when we let God into our lives, we can't help but become a sacrificial people...

Amen.

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