

“Giving Gifts to God”

Pastor Mary Robinson-Mohr

Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

Sunday, June 29th, 2008

By this time you have no doubt received a letter from the Session that was sent out this last week announcing my resignation as your pastor as of July 31. This was a difficult decision for me to make, but as my headaches and pinched nerves have not cooperated with me or with the demands of ministry, it seemed the best thing for me and for St. James at this time. Don't worry, we'll get to have a party on my last Sunday with you at the end of July, and we'll celebrate the time we have had together to be co-laborers in Christ's work.

But we have not come here this morning to talk about me or about ministers or other such things. We are here this morning to worship God and to gather around the Word of God, as Presbyterians do when they worship God. Some churches gather around a Communion Table for their central act of worship. Presbyterians gather around the Bible, around the written Word and then the proclaimed Word. We will have other opportunities to talk about other matters at other times. Now we are here to listen to the Holy Spirit guide us in ways of understanding the transforming Word of God.

And I have to think the Holy Spirit has quite a task this morning! Our Scripture lesson from Genesis is full of challenges to the twenty-first century hearer. Who in their right mind would ever treat any child in such a manner today, let alone their very own child? Why, Child Protective Services would be brought in immediately if anyone tied up a child, placed them on an unlit bonfire with a torch at the ready, and waved a knife above them. Hopefully a good child therapist could work with such a traumatized child, also, to lessen the inevitable nightmares and trust issues. You can bet the whole incident would hit the evening news, and we'd all be horrified to hear of it.

Such concerns were not the concerns of that ancient world, however. A patriarch of a household held the power of life and death and destiny over the women and children of that household. Therefore, if someone like Abraham deemed this act as necessary, then it would have to be accepted. And the travesty of all of this is that people even today will use Scriptures such as this and such as the crucifixion of Jesus to shape our own modern acceptance of abuse toward women and to others deemed as voiceless. You know what I mean by voiceless. It's that subconscious stratification that is often made of people. “This pious Christian man must be closer to God than an Iraqi Shi'ite, therefore the orders and the demands of the pious Christian man must be supported over and against the other.” And if righteousness means that some must quietly suffer, then why should we stand in the way of the suffering of certain people? At least that's the mindset.

This tendency toward allowing some to have more voice and power than others had taken a turn in Abraham's world toward child sacrifice. The Canaanites and other surrounding people felt that if you really wanted to get the attention and the obligation of a god, you would give that god a wonderful and valuable gift in the form of a burnt offering or sacrifice. You would give that god the choicest possessions you had, and what could be more valuable than a first-born child, or son? So child sacrifice was a part of the religion of Abraham's world. We hear of the struggles of ancient Israel with this ritual of child sacrifice throughout the pages of the Old Testament. What emerges out of the overall message is that child sacrifice may be committed by people who worship various gods, and it might be acceptable to the world view of that time and place, but it is not pleasing to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is abhorrent to this God! Therefore, the people of this God will not sacrifice their children.

Now, I have to tell you, if I were a mother in one of those ancient Canaanite city states, and if I got wind that my husband or a priest felt a need to sacrifice one of my children, I'd grab my child in the night and head for the hills, and join up with people who saw child sacrifice as repulsive to their god. If you have been in our Wednesday Night or Friday Night Bible studies with me, you know that archaeological evidence possibly leans toward such a movement in the early beginnings of Israel. We won't unpack all of that now, but that is quite a story.

Now it would be one thing to look at today's Scripture and say, "Well, Abraham sure got a wild notion about sacrifices and about Isaac that day." But we are told that God first directed him to do this. Wait a minute! Isn't this the same God that says in other places in the Bible that child sacrifice is the last thing to be desired? And didn't it take forever and a year for Abraham and Sarah to finally have this child, Isaac? And isn't Isaac the only hope given to Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars at night? Isaac is the child of promise, the child of laughter and joy. So why is God such a contradiction here?

If you want a simple and clear answer to that question, you are about to be disappointed. Lots of people smarter than us have scratched their heads over this, and they are still scratching their heads. It is quite a puzzle. However, when you see that "testing" is the theme behind all this, a few things become clear. Abraham has been given a gift in Isaac, and Abraham will have more grandchildren and great-grandchildren than he can count. How easy it is to become cocky about God's gifts, and how easy it is to feel one must be more special than others to have God's gifts. Abraham and Sarah could finally thumb their noses at others, and say, "Look at us! We're old as dirt, but God decided we should have a very special child. Bet you don't have God's favor like we do!"

So many people today look at Christian faith or any religion for that matter and ask, "So, what's in it for me? What is God ever going to do for me if I decide to follow God's ways? What do I get out of it?"

In a similar manner, one must wonder if Abraham has moved away from deep trust and faith in God simply because God is God, or if Abraham has moved into a mindset of following God to get all the gifts and benefits. “Hey God, you gave me Isaac, now there’s no way you’re going to let us fall into poverty or famine. As a matter of fact, since you’ve treated me in a special way, then I can surely take food from others during a food shortage, because they can’t be as special as me and my miracle child!” Is Abraham developing a sense of entitlement to God’s gifts? Is Abraham forgetting the Giver of the gift, and idolizing the gift alone? Is Abraham in this whole business of faith only for the reward?

That’s an easy trap for any of us. It’s a sense of entitlement to the resources of the world, surely, we think, because God has blessed us and rewarded us for some reason. And we’ll be faithful as long as there is something in it for us. God had better jump to our commands and needs, or we’ll just sleep in on Sunday mornings! We’ll show that God! And we forget that God is God, and that we are not god, and never will be.

So a horrible test is given to Abraham. It is a humbling test, one that shows that, when it’s all said and done, Abraham will put his trust in God even above his cherished son, Isaac. Abraham has passed the test, and God intervenes to show that he really is a God different from all the others. Abraham’s God doesn’t give the gift of a child only to have that child killed for no good reason. Abraham’s God will call people away from the accepted norms of their culture into a way that affirms the goodness of God and the life-giving power of God.

Don’t you wonder how people in a thousand years will look back at us, and say, “How could they ever think that?” or “How could they possibly do that?” Here we are appropriately horrified at the whole idea of child sacrifice today, and glad that God moved people away from such a practice. What is a current practice in our culture that God is trying to get us to abandon? What happens in our world today to essentially sacrifice the well-being of voiceless and powerless persons? How is God calling us to reshape and reform our world so that it reflects that God does indeed love the whole world and every one in it? About 150 years ago, slavery was acceptable. Then it was challenged. How is God continuing to call us to carve the ideals of God into the substance of our world right now?

So what about giving God a gift? How do we show our deep devotion to God today? Well, Jesus gives us a pretty clear picture of that in today’s Gospel lesson: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones....” It is our kindness and our gifts of compassion to others that is the gift God wants from us. It isn’t anything else. A great gift to give to God is to reach out to the little ones of the world, and make sure they are treated as if they are valuable to God and loved by God. The

prophet Micah had that right when he wrote, "...what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

So let us go into the world with the justice, kindness, and devotion to God that are the greatest gifts to give. Amen.