

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, June 28, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“How Much?”

Scriptures:

Genesis 22: 1-14

Romans 6: 12-23

Matthew 10: 34-42

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How much is our faith worth?

What price do we put on it?

That is the unsettling question the Bible puts to us this day.

It is stated plainly in the Gospel reading, and placed in a legendary form in the OT reading from Genesis 22.

We heard again the primitive story of a man who was reluctant, yet willing, to offer up a human sacrifice to his god, with his precious son as the unsuspecting victim. Abraham took Isaac up a mountain, bound him up and placed him on an altar.

Another Sunday with a difficult passage, that requires some careful thought.

I think everyone who reads this story has problems with it.

I still have my very first Bible – a lovely little King James Bible with a black leather cover and my name in gold.

It had wonderful pictures in it – renderings of famous paintings, I think. I remember the one of this scene from Genesis.

It showed a terrified Isaac tied kneeling on a stone altar, and a tall, long-bearded Abraham standing over him with a knife raised for the sacrificial kill.

The knife, by the way, was a very large curved one, almost big enough to be a scimitar.

Nearby, caught in some scrub, was a ram, but Abraham has not yet noticed the ram.

The story and such pictures stuck in my mind.

Would my father kill me if God asked him to?

Another consideration, of course, is the theological question:

Would a loving God ask a man to kill his child as a means of proving his faith?

What would we do with any man today who was caught taking his child up a mountain in order to sacrifice him?

We would arrest him and put him behind bars.

If he continued to insist that he was obeying the Word of God, we would insist that he receive psychiatric care.

The idea of human sacrifice is repugnant to us.

We would see it as utterly immoral and suspect that the poor fellow was not dealing with **God** but with the **Devil**.

What about this God of ours – as we see God in the Old Testament?

Are we morally superior to the God of the Old Testament?

How do we reconcile the Old Testament God with the God of Jesus?

Are agnostic humanitarians today, more ethical than the God of Genesis?

This is not a new question posed by us, the extra-clever little citizens of the twenty first century, who are inclined to feel superior to the generations that went before us.

It troubled early Christians also.

BRUCE PREWER:

One such person was a fellow called Marcion, the son of a bishop.

Marcion went to Rome and taught that the God of the Old Testament was a fickle, cruel secondary being (Demiurge) who had nothing in common with the true God of Jesus.

Marcion formed a powerful sect, and only permitted a Bible made up of the Gospel of St Luke and ten epistles of St Paul.

Marcion's views were strenuously rejected by the main body of Christianity.

His own father, the bishop of Sinope on the Black Sea, excommunicated his son Marcion, which no doubt confirmed Marcion's opinion of the bad God of the Old Testament.

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This story of Marcion reminds us that we are not the first to have reservations about some of the Old Testament.

His answer was unsatisfactory, but we can feel for him.

Some passages are offensive to our sensibilities; the very same sensibilities that Christ Jesus has shaped within us.

Prewer reminds us of two things we must remember, if we are to keep things in perspective.

The first thing: **The Old Testament foreshadows Jesus**

Listen to the whole Old Testament; don't get bogged down in the awkward bits.

The Old Testament also reaches the mighty heights of belief:

The opening of Genesis with the declaration that God's own breath is in us,
The high morality of the ten commandments,
The trusting, intimate faith of the twenty third psalm,
The glorious, honest faith of **Job**,
The universal love of God depicted in the little book of **Jonah**,
The lofty ethics of social justice in the great prophets like **Amos, Micah,**
and Amos,

The compassion of **Hosea** and **Isaiah**, the loyal love of **Ruth**,
and the beauty and faith of **psalm 139**

“Where shall I go from your Spirit, where can I be outside your Presence?

If I ascend into the heavens you are there, if I make my bed in hell, you are also there with me.”

What we later discover in the lovely, loving Jesus of Nazareth, is already there, to some degree, in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament.

It prepares for Christ Jesus.

It leads us surely to Christ Jesus.

The second thing: Read things in context.

One of the first things we learned in Biblical studies in seminary was:
the importance of reading things in their context.

In this case, there may be two possible interpretations, maybe more.

1/- Abraham stands at the early stage of the developing faith of the Hebrew people.

His understanding is limited, but he knew that God must come first in all things.

[Kind of a reminder of last week’s Gospel passage from Matthew 10]

Maybe he got the means to express his faith wrong when he took his son up that mountain, but he did have his priorities right.

He does show complete faith and love for his God.

2/- It may be that God is limited, in each generation, to dealing with us (foolish creatures of limited understanding) in the limited ways we can comprehend.

Maybe even today God has to settle for using aspects of our life which will be repugnant to future generations, in order to help us grow in faith.

If human sacrifice in Abraham’s day was the high expression of devotion to the gods,
and if the offering of one’s own child was widely seen as the highest expression of devotion,
then maybe God had to use that context to stretch the faith of Abraham to the fullest extent.

(Remember, in the story as it is handed down to us, **at no stage does God intend that Isaac will be killed.**)

It is right that we today, followers of Christ Jesus, should find the idea of human sacrifice repugnant.

But that does not mean that it should have seemed wrong to Abraham that God wanted him to do such a thing.

We must not judge the story by our post-Jesus consciences.

Let me now suggest the main feature of that old story which should speak to us and challenge us:

For Abraham God came first.

Absolutely first.

No conditions.

No fine print.

Is our faith and love anywhere near that level?

If it is not, then let us be humble in the presence of the story of Abraham.

For Jesus, God comes first.

Remember these words - I recycle them from last week - Jesus takes up the same issue with his disciples.

"He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.

He who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

And he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it."

Notice that there are two warnings in this hard saying of Jesus.

The **first** is that our loyalty to no person, no matter how dear to us, can take priority over our loyalty to Christ.

The **second** is that our own life must not override Christ's claim on us

- *"taking up the cross"* is the metaphor to describe putting one's own life on the line for Jesus.

Unlike the Abraham story, Jesus is not asking us to sacrifice our loved ones on some altar.

He is asking us to put them second to our loyalty to God.

Many people are still offended by this saying of Christ.

They accuse him of cutting across that which is most precious and dear.

I don't see it that way.

He is asking us to allow nothing to limit the most precious and dearest and enduring thing of all: **our love of God.**

Factually, in most cases, putting God (the God of Jesus!) first will enable us to express our love for dear ones much better than we ever have before.

God first.

We are willing to lose all in the cause of Christ.

That is what matters most.

SUMMARY

Whatever the faults in the story of Abraham and Isaac going up the mountain, there is an admirable message there.

We hear the voice of the curious child asking:

"Father, I can see the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

To which the poor father, already grieving, can only say:

"God will provide a lamb for the offering, my son."

Abraham had it right in putting God first.

God had it right in providing another lamb for the sacrifice.

After that event, Abraham experienced even a greater sense of blessing.

It was the blessing of those who, being prepared to lose their life,
to lose everything most precious to them,
then find life in greater fullness.

That is a blessing worth seeking.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, MESSIAH, AND HOLY SPIRIT AMEN

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Matthew 10: 34-42 - comments

"What would happen if we stopped expecting people to come on their own initiative through our church doors, and instead took seriously our calling to bring the gospel to them?"

"My neighbor, in all her neediness, is Christ for me."

"These are the basics of Christian hospitality... no surprises... nothing fancy... just an active awareness that all these "little ones" are our guests of honor... the honor of Christ."

Opening Prayer

God of grace, You have brought us from slavery to freedom, from despair to hope, from death to life!

Holy is Your name!

We gather together in Your presence with gratitude and praise for all that You have done for us. May the presence of Your Holy Spirit inspire our worship.

May our words and music, our thoughts, and prayers, even our very lives, bring honour and glory to You.

God, we confess that we have sinned in your sight.

Despite our best efforts and intentions, we have failed to consistently live in ways that bring honour to your name.

Forgive us.

Through the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, set us free from the grip of sin— from attitudes and actions that do not lead to life. **AMEN**

Words of Assurance (based on Romans 6:16-17; 22-23)

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth,
I ask you to accept God's saving love,
putting your sins and mistakes behind you,
and letting go of regrets and fears.

Now face the future with the measured optimism of those
who know they are destined to ultimate victory.

By God's saving love you are released; you are at liberty!

Thanks be to God! AMEN

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Lord God of heaven and earth, with joy and thanksgiving, we praise you
for you create, sustain, and redeem all things.

For making us in your image to love one another and to care for your creation,

we give you thanks.

For the gift of your Son whose life is the pattern for our lives and learning,

we give you thanks.

For the energy of your Spirit to inspire us in times of challenge and change,

we give you thanks.

Strengthen us in these difficult days to show your love to others as we pray for the church and those who lead it as we adapt to new ways of worshiping and being together...

For creation that we may learn to reverence and care for it...

For those who lead in the nations of the world that they may work for the well-being of the most vulnerable...

For those who serve as teachers, healers, and caregivers in these stressful days when their work is so demanding...

For the poor, the homeless, the hungry and all whose livelihoods have been disrupted during the pandemic...

For those who are ill or struggling in isolation, and for those who mourn the loss of someone dear...

For the powerless and the oppressed in all places and for those who work to defend them...

Hear us now as we pray for situations on our hearts this day.

Here at New St. James – Ian McCrimmon, Bob Baron, Laura Crozier

The First Nations of our country as they seek justice, fair treatment, their legal rights, and basic needs, like clean water.

We celebrate and seek to learn from their teachings, and history, and culture.

We also pray for our country – coast to coast to coast, in all its people, provinces, and parts

God eternal, keep us in communion with your people across all times and in all places. May we serve you faithfully, blessing others as we have been blessed by your love through Jesus Christ who taught us to pray together:

The Lord's Prayer

SENDING OUT

Go out with the Gospel ringing in your ears, with joy flooding your heart and with love flowing through your hands.

The Lover of the universe will uphold you,
the Saviour of the lost will enfold you,
the Spirit of truth will mould you, forever, Amen!

***The Rev Ian Ross-McDonald
General Secretary, The Life and Mission Agency***

Members of the **National Indigenous Ministry Council** of the PCC met with the Moderator and some denominational staff on June 10 to discuss urgent concerns and severe circumstances facing many Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

We heard about insufficient housing, poor access to health care, police violence, the lack of safe drinking water on First Nations reserve lands, impinged rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and broken treaties, particularly violation of land rights, discrimination, and the complex implications of intergenerational trauma on communities that have been targeted through colonial instruments like the residential school system.

The church must stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples and work for an end to all forms of systemic racism against Indigenous Peoples and communities.

“*Home*” for many Indigenous Peoples has been taken away or disrupted by forced relocations, housing insecurity and intergenerational trauma from colonial practices, such as the Indian Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the disproportionate number of Indigenous children removed from homes and communities by the Foster Care system.

Even as we met on Wednesday, we could hear the manifestations of the violence and trauma that Indigenous Peoples experience every day in this country, not just in the stories that were shared, but in overhearing cries of distress from a woman at one of the Indigenous ministries.

We could hear her crying out in the background, “*I want to go home,*” while the staff who were present with her stepped away from the call to offer her comfort and support.

We did not know what triggered this woman’s distress in the moment.

But one of the underlying factors in this moment is undeniably the destructive forces of systemic racism and colonialism responsible for this loss of home and security.

We heard that day, as we have heard before, that the only way to truly heal the trauma and distress she and so many other Indigenous Peoples are experiencing is through ending systemic racism and colonialism, and dismantling the structures that continue to harm and kill Indigenous Peoples today.

In the following weeks, the group that met will be working to present to the church information and actions that can be taken regarding these concerns.

The witness of the church has not always been faithful to the love, justice, and humility we are called to show, but we have been working to become more faithful witnesses to what God’s love and justice looks like for all people.

Truly working for the healing and reconciliation that are required to ensure basic rights for Indigenous Peoples in Canada is one necessary way we must pursue that witness, and we look forward to sharing more with the church soon as we explore faithful ways to do so.