

Fear and Trembling

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 27, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:37-39.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I use to spend countless hours, in high school, running on the back road of Newark and on the Louviers Golf course, with Joe Gaglia, Ed Kremer, and Ken Williamsom, training for track meets. We graduated from Newark High School in 1962. Ed, Ken and Joe attended the University of Delaware where they continued to run track. I went to Wheaton College in Illinois where I also ran track. During the Christmas and Easter breaks and ~~during the~~ ^{vacation's} summer we'd continue to work out together.

The nation's involvement in Vietnam was building up at that time. As long as we were in college we had student deferments. After college, Ed and I had deferments for graduate studies. Ken's draft number was so high that he really didn't worry, ~~about getting drafted~~. But Joe's number virtually assured him of being drafted as soon as he graduated.

He talked to an Army recruiter. "Join our officer training program," he said. "You can choose where you want to go and what you want to do." That sounded good, so Joe joined the Army and became an officer, at which time the Army assigned him to the infantry bound for Vietnam. "Wait a second," Joe said. "You said I could choose where I wanted to go and do." "Well," they said, "We're all filled up everywhere else but we have lots of openings ~~for~~ in Vietnam for Second Lieutenants."

Joe was the oldest of three boys. His father died when he was in high school, leaving his mom to raise the kids by herself. Both of Joe's parents were born in Italy. Like many immigrants they were highly patriotic. On the Fourth of July or any national holiday they proudly flew the American flag. Joe's mom was especially proud that she was the mother of a United States Army officer. She said proudly, in her heavy Italian accent, "I love America. In Italy we had nothing. We had no shoes for our feet. We had no food for the table. We had no

work. But in America my husband got a good job building houses. ~~Now~~ We have a nice home. We have food on the table. My boy, Joey, is a college graduate. We owe America everything we have. I love Joey. I don't want to lose him. But if America tells me to sacrifice my son, I sacrifice my son. I'll go to mass every day. I'll light a candle and pray for him until he comes home. But if he doesn't come home, I'll be proud that my son gave his life for his country." As it turned out Joe came home safely.

Sometimes our nation tells us to sacrifice our children and we obey. We obey because most of us believe that the nation has good reasons for requiring the sacrifice. Most Americans love their country and, if we have to sacrifice our sons and daughters, we trust that some greater good will be accomplished.

But does God ever ask us to sacrifice our children? Let's go back about 4000 years to an aged, childless couple, Abraham and Sarah. When they were young, God had promised them a son through whom the whole world would be blessed. But Sarah was long past the age for childbearing. God's promise seemed like cruel mockery. Then, wonder of wonders, Sarah, when she was 90 years old, ~~she~~ got pregnant! Laughter echoed through the tents of Abraham. The servants joked with one another about Sarah's pregnancy. Abraham's friends slapped him on the back, laughing, "You're over a hundred, Abraham! I didn't know you had it in you!" Finally the child was born. Sarah and Abraham name him "Laughter" which, in Hebrew, is "Isaac".

Imagine the love Isaac received as the only child of Abraham and Sarah? There's something very special about an only child. There's one society on the face of the earth where nearly every child is an only child. In China today, in an effort to curb population growth, the government has declared that each family will be restricted to one child. "Well," you say, "they must love their children very much." I think they do. They're totally preoccupied with their children. Everything the child does is watched. Everything they say is listened to carefully and that's very, very special. All children are special, but *only* children are

especially special. Isaac was an only child. He knew he was special. He knew he was loved. Whenever he cried out, Abraham and Sarah were there to hold him. How they loved this young man.

But one day, when Isaac was a boy, God said, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." God 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 upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Abraham trusted God's mysterious command. ^{Like Mary Magdalene who loved her country, Abraham loved God... God had fulfilled past promises} In fear and trembling he believed that God would fulfill his ^{as yet unfulfilled} promise to bless the world through Isaac. He believed that somehow God would provide the sacrifice demanded of Abraham. He believed that he'd return from the mountain with Isaac.

Can this story be true? Does God ever test a parent in this way? It's one thing for our nation to ask us to sacrifice our children, but does God? Now, there are confused and crazy people who murder their children. They say, "It's God's will." The story of Abraham and Isaac is a dangerous story in the hands of these crazy people. But does God ever required sane, normal, parents to sacrifice their children?

I have a strong temptation to say, "No!" I'm tempted to explain away the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac. I'm tempted to say, "Abraham only *thought* God told him to sacrifice Isaac." I'm tempted to say, "This reflects a very primitive stage in semitic religion when child sacrifice was practiced." But these rationalistic explanations don't take the story seriously. In seminary, Dr. Macleod, my preaching professor, used to tell us in his Scottish brogue, "Don't explain away the text! Preach it, laddie, even if you don't like what it says. Tell them that you don't like what it says, if you have to, but don't explain it away. Preach it! Use the best historical and linguistic tools at hand but, whatever you do, preach it as the Word of God!"

Does God ever command us to sacrifice our children? Yes, he does! Abraham's obedience not only pleased God but also provided Isaac with an unforgettable, if not terrifying, object lesson

in trusting God with life's most valuable possessions. God requires all believers to sacrifice their children to him.

That's part of the meaning of baptism. When I was in Guatemala nine years ago, I visited an ancient Mayan ~~Native American~~ religious site. A large square stone stood about four feet high and four feet square on the side of a volcano. Ages ago, Mayans ~~Native Americans~~ had inscribed strange and frightening religious symbols on the stone. They hollowed out the top of it. In that bowl shaped, recessed area, Mayan chiefs placed their first born sons. A pagan priest took a sacred knife and killed the child. Blood filled the cavity in the stone. And the dead child was lifted high in the arms of the priest as a sacrifice to the Mayan gods.

Eventually Christian missionaries came. Contrary to what we often read today, not everything these missionaries did was bad. Through these missionaries, Mayans began to turn from their pagan gods to Christ. The pagan child sacrifices ceased. But Christian Guatemalans continued to bring their children to that stone altar. ^{They poured water in the bowl shaped recess} ~~Water replaced the blood.~~ A Christian ^{held the child in his arms and} priest said, "I kill you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and then plunged the infant into the water, buried with Christ in baptism. Then the priest would raised ^{holding} the child out of the water and lift the child up to the Lord, symbolic of being raised with Christ to eternal life. Those Guatemalans know that the God whom they have come to know in Jesus Christ, like the ancient pagan gods, requires them to sacrifice their sons and daughters to the Lord.

How does this apply to us today?

When it comes right down to it we don't really have a choice about sacrificing our sons and daughters. The question is, to what god will we sacrifice them? Sometimes we sacrifice our sons and daughters ^{to the Gods of industry} in order to get ahead in our work. We sacrifice our children to Mammon when we communicate by our lives that making money is the most important goal in life?

To what god will we sacrifice our children? Will we sacrifice our sons and daughters to

Bacchus, the god of wine and wild living? Will we communicate to them that the main purpose in life is self fulfillment and having a good time? Will we sacrifice our daughters and sons to Venus, the goddess of sex, by communicating to them, in one way or another, that sex outside of marriage is permitted? Will we sacrifice our sons and daughters to Mars, the god of war, by communicating to them that there's no purpose greater than America's national interest?

Or will we offer up our children as living sacrifices to the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ? Will we sacrifice our children to the God who loved the world so much that he sacrificed his only Son that we might have eternal life? When we sacrifice our sons and daughters to false gods we risk losing them forever and for all eternity. When we sacrifice our sons and daughters to the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ we enable them to be a blessing to this world and save them for all eternity.

all of us who love the young people in our church & who want the best for them
I urge ~~us all~~ to tell them ~~the young people of our church~~ over and over again the meaning of their baptism. They were buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him to newness of life. Be what you are; people who have been presented to God as a living sacrifice and given new life *people give in life greater than having a good time & making money.* with a ~~transcendent~~ purpose. Our children need to be reminded over and over that we've committed them to the Lord whom we know in Jesus Christ. They belong to the Lord. We don't belong to ourselves. We don't have a right to do whatever we want to do with our lives ~~or~~ with our bodies. We belong to the Lord. The Lord has a right to do with us what he wants to do with us, to make of us what he wants to make of us, to send us where he wants to send us.

God requires each Christian parent and every Christian congregation to offer up our sons and daughters as living sacrifices to the Lord. That means trusting the Lord's promises to be the God of our children; *trusting* ~~and~~ his promise to bless the world through our children as they trust and obey Christ. It means teaching our kids that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. It means teaching them that the one who loses their life for Christ's sake will find it; ~~We tell our children~~ that the most important goal in life is not *to make* ~~making~~ a lot of money but to glorify God

and enjoy God forever.

Does God ask us to sacrifice up our children to him? We know our nation sometimes ask us to sacrifice our children. Uncle Sam came to Mrs. Gaglia and said, "I need your son, your first born son, whom you love. Trust that your nation knows what it's doing and sacrifice him." In fear and trembling, this patriotic Italian immigrant let go of her son and trusted him to a nation she had come to love.

And God comes to each one of us and says, "Take your children, whom you love, and offer them up to me as a living sacrifice. Trust that I know what I'm doing. Trust that if you obey you will see my promises^{fulfilled} to bless the world through your children. Remind them often that they belong to me. Teach them my laws and commandments. Tell them of my loving purpose to save the world. Trust me! Trust me and trust your children to me!"

Let us pray: Almighty God, help us to trust you more than we trust even our nation. Help us willingly to offer up our sons and daughters to us as living sacrifices. Help us to trust you with our most loved relationships and possessions. Enable us, in word and example, to teach and nurture the young people in this church to pursue Christ's kingdom and righteousness. This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.