

Gen. 22:1-14; Rom. 6:12-23; Matt. 10:40-42
Third Sunday After Pentecost

God Blinks*

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Emmanuel Church in the City of Boston
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Good morning! Before I begin, I want to make sure that your smart phones and tablet computers are turned *on*. Yes, I mean on. Today has been designated as “Social Media Sunday” by many Episcopal churches across the country. Why? Well, June 29th is traditionally the feast day of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, two great apostles and evangelists. And so there’s been a grass roots movement to make this day, the last Sunday in June, a day of new evangelism.

To that end, I want to acknowledge the great work of Emmanuel’s Web Committee and its co-chairs, Elizabeth Richardson and Matt Griffing. Would the members of this committee please stand up? Let’s thank them for our wonderful online presence.

I also want to encourage each of you to take photos of this sermon and post them to Facebook or Twitter. I’m serious. Take out your phones right now. I know a lot of you are on Facebook, so don’t be shy. Be sure to label your posts with the hashtag “Episcopal” (that is, number sign and Episcopal) or hashtag “SMSunday” so that people can find them and learn about our wonderful faith community.

Now on to the sermon. As many of you know, I was ordained as a deacon just over three weeks ago, right here at Emmanuel Church. It was a wonderful day. One of the things that we ordinands have to do as part of the ordination service is to sign an oath of obedience to the Episcopal Church. One of my most vivid memories of that day was my sponsoring priest turning to me right before I had to walk up to the table and whispering: “There’s still time to change your mind!”

It’s striking to me, therefore, that today’s reading from the Hebrew Bible is the binding of Isaac. This story is traditionally called the *Akedah Yitzahk* in Hebrew, and it raises the question of our obedience to God as people of faith. In this reading, we hear about God’s testing of Abraham and commanding him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Abraham takes Isaac to a mountain, builds an altar, and ties up Isaac. Just as Abraham is about to kill Isaac, an angel of God tells him to stop and to sacrifice a ram instead.

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For me, the binding of Isaac is one of the most challenging and troubling passages in all of scripture. What kind of sadistic God would ever demand the sacrifice of one's child? I mean, Michael and I feel guilty whenever we have to leave our dog Chartres in doggie day care for the day. I could never imagine doing anything close to sacrificing a child. Even more troubling, the Christian doctrine of atonement is sometimes understood as the binding of Isaac taken to an extreme – that is, God the Father not only demands the killing of God the Son for our salvation, but that bloody sacrifice is actually carried out on the cross.

Obedience, of course, is a question not just for ordained ministers, but for all people of faith. Indeed, unthinking, or blind, obedience can lead to horrific consequences. Just last month, a woman in Florida was charged with killing the two-year-old daughter of her ex-partner who had broken up with her. The detectives investigating the case found a tragic note written by the woman. The note said that the woman had attended church the day before and heard a sermon about Abraham and Isaac – this very passage. The woman had written in her note: “God never told me to stop.”

Some Jewish commentators have argued that the story of the binding of Isaac is actually *not* about unthinking obedience. Rather, it is a game of divine chicken. That is, neither God nor Abraham actually intends for Isaac to die. The question is who will blink first. These commentators have said that Abraham is actually testing God, to see if God is more compassionate than the gods who demanded child sacrifice in the Ancient Near East.

If you read the narrative closely, you can see that Abraham is actually dragging his feet at every moment throughout the narrative, acting slowly, and constantly giving God an opportunity to change God's mind. Abraham gets up, saddles his donkey, takes his servants and Isaac with him, cuts wood, travels for three days, gives Isaac the wood to carry, walks further with Isaac, talks with Isaac, walks even further, builds an altar, lays the wood on the altar, binds Isaac, places Isaac on the wood . . . you get the idea.

God, on the other hand, tests Abraham to see whether he will choose to exercise moral agency over unquestioning obedience. Abraham, in fact, passes the test. So God ultimately blinks.

This interpretation of Abraham's actions as quiet resistance actually makes a lot of sense, particularly since Abraham never says that he will sacrifice Isaac. In fact, Abraham tells his two servants that “we” – that is, both he and Isaac – will return from the mountain. And elsewhere in the Book of Genesis we see that Abraham is vehemently opposed to the taking of innocent life, famously arguing with God over the fate of the people of Sodom. So God doesn't have to tell Abraham to stop, because I'd like to think that Abraham wouldn't have sacrificed Isaac anyway.

Yesterday was the 45th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, the birth of the modern lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights movement in the United States. Early in the morning of June 28, 1969, a small group of LGBT people in a bar in

Greenwich Village decided they were tired of being subjected to humiliating raids and arrests by the police and decided to fight back. Each year, the New York City pride march is held on the last Sunday of June to commemorate this important act of moral agency.

For me, one of the most moving traditions of the pride march involves the Church of the Ascension, an Episcopal parish that is located on lower Fifth Avenue, near the entrance to Greenwich Village. Numerous volunteers from the parish – both LGBT and allies – stand outside of the church and provide cups of cool water to every single participant in the march, who at this point have walked dozens of city blocks and are tired and thirsty.

I am reminded of today's Gospel reading from Matthew whenever I think about the Church of the Ascension's unique ministry of water hospitality. Jesus teaches us to give water to those who are in need – that is, the “little ones.” This simple act of kindness is akin to welcoming Jesus himself and will not be forgotten. The Church of the Ascension has been exercising its quiet ministry of hospitality for years, long before same-sex blessings were approved by General Convention and Gene Robinson was consecrated a bishop. Like Abraham, the parish has chosen to exercise its moral agency in its own distinctive way.

I am reminded of how Emmanuel Church remained open after last year's Boston marathon bombings for anyone who needed water, to use a bathroom, or to make a phone call. And how, since the nineteenth century, this parish has been a place that welcomes anyone who is thirsty – either physically or spiritually. Jesus says elsewhere in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 25, to be precise) that we literally minister to Jesus whenever we give anyone who is thirsty something to drink.

As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, we are called to exercise righteousness over sin. Sin is not just about sex, but rather about how we separate ourselves from God and neighbor. From that perspective, sin can be understood as an unquestioning conformity to rules, or an unhealthy obedience that leads to the subjugation of others and even murder or genocide. By contrast, grace can be understood as the gift of moral discernment and questioning.

We live in a complex world. Mature ethical analysis is not so much a question of black-or-white thinking, but rather learning to live with different shades of gray. (Not so much fifty shades of gray, but ethical shades of gray.) And moral discernment can be incredibly challenging in a hi-tech world that is full of sound bites and 140-character tweets that urge us to react viscerally and to constantly choose sides.

Whenever we are faced with the question of unthinking obedience, I believe that God is calling us to pause, like Abraham, to drag our feet, and to wrestle with the ethical norms of radical hospitality. We don't need to wait for God to tell us to stop. We've already been given the moral agency to stop ourselves.

Ask yourself: Am I furthering the ministry of giving out water to the “little ones,” or am I opposing such a ministry? Am I welcoming prophets or am I persecuting them? Whenever possible, we should err on the side of radical hospitality and love, for that’s who God is. And *that* is Good News – with a capital G and a capital N – that’s truly worth tweeting about and posting on Facebook.

Amen.