

A woman was talking about her parents who had recently retired. Her mom had always wanted to learn to play the piano, so her dad bought her mom a piano for her birthday. A few weeks later, the woman asked how her mom was doing with it.

“Oh, we returned the piano,” said her dad, “I persuaded her to switch to a clarinet instead.” “How come” the daughter asked. “Well,” he answered, “because with a clarinet, she can’t sing while she plays.”

A man and his wife were browsing in a crafts store one day when the man noticed a display of country-style musical instruments. After looking over the flutes, dulcimers and recorders, he picked up a shiny, one-stringed instrument he took to be a mouth harp. He put it to his lips and, much to the amusement of other shoppers, twanged a few notes on it. After watching from a distance, his wife came up and whispered in his ear, “I hate to tell you this, honey, but you’re trying to play a cheese slicer.”

When we imagine this bizarre story of Abraham sacrificing his beloved son Isaac, we usually picture a grown man and a little child, with that grown man able to overpower and sacrifice his own child. But this is not the case. Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born. By the time this story happens, Isaac is a strapping teen-aged young man. We’re told that Abraham loads the wood for the burnt-offering on to Isaac’s back. Abraham is far too old and frail to carry it himself.

Now the ancient Jewish rabbis especially loved this story, which they called the *Aqedah* – the binding of Isaac. This gives the story an entirely different nuance and meaning than ‘the sacrifice of Isaac,’ which is the way we typically refer to the story. The writer reminds us that Isaac was everything to his father Abraham. Indeed, three times God and his angel acknowledge that Isaac is Abraham’s ‘only beloved son.’ Fascinatingly, in Scripture, other than Isaac, only Jesus is called the only beloved Son.

The tradition elaborates upon the terrible journey Abraham makes with Isaac to Mount Moriah – later to become Mount Zion (2 Chron 3:1) – as they walked, talked, and camped over 3 days. Then Isaac asks the most challenging question of all: “Where is the lamb for sacrifice? To which his father can only say, “God himself will provide the lamb.” Prophetic, of course, but awful.

We know the rest of the story. Isaac is spared and God provides a ram whose horns were stuck in a nearby thicket. The ancient rabbis, however, wondered aloud how an animal sacrifice – indeed, how all of the animal sacrifices over the centuries – could forgive sins or reestablish the covenant relationship between God and humanity (cf Is 1:11; Ps 50:8-13). Their answer, surprisingly, was that they couldn’t. But they reasoned that the younger, stronger, faster Isaac could not have possibly been overpowered by his old and frail father – that he willingly allowed himself to be bound – the *Aqedah* – and freely accepted his own sacrifice – and THAT did have the power to wipe away sin and reconcile us with God. The animal sacrifices were a ‘remembrance’ and a re-presentation of the beloved son’s self-offering.

When early Christians looked back at this archetypal narrative, they saw a remarkable echo of the sacrificial death of Jesus. Jesus is the only Beloved Son AND the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, who in the upper room gave us the remembrance meal of the new and everlasting covenant. And shortly after that last supper, was arrested and allowed HIMSELF TO BE BOUND and led away, freely and willingly, laying down His life on the very same mountain, Mount Zion. (all taken from Rich Mickle’s homily on this) These stories are always so rich and many layered they just blow me away!

Second, as modern people, we rightly shake our heads at the crazy things people do in the name of God. That is partly because few of us take God – or religion – very seriously anymore; not as seriously as Abraham, in any case. But before we criticize Abraham too quickly, we might ask ourselves a pungent question: for what modern deities do we sacrifice our sons? Do not many modern fathers simply update the ancient practice of child sacrifice with an absolute holocaust to a new and more terrible god named Career? Many modern men can garb this deity in clothes as sacrosanct as ever cloaked a primitive idol -- and offer unto it acts of abject obeisance that would make God blanch; long days and no Sabbath rest, total dedication, unquestioned obedience, and limitless service. A 'voice' says, of course that all this work is for the family and the children after all: besides, there is always 'quality time' with the son. But however much a father might believe such Yuppie claptrap, his spiritually abandoned son and daughter won't buy it. In the painful honesty of youth, the children know full well that they have been sacrificed by their father at the High Altar of American Business and Success. (adapted from Patrick Arnold, WILDMEN, WARRIORS, AND KINGS, p. 97)

Another fascinating parallel in this story is that many ancient civilizations practiced human sacrifice, as with the Aztecs in Mexico and the Canaanites in Palestine. Both cultures worshiped demon gods that ruled their cultures by ritually murdering one-third of all their children by either cutting out their hearts or making them walk into the fire or both. Interestingly, one-third is close to the same proportion of our children killed in America today. The only difference is that we do it before the children are born rather than after, and that the name of the evil god that we obey when we abort our own children is not Moloch or Baal but sexual freedom and autonomy. (from Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, Cycle B, p. 169)

Third, an application for us all. This strange story has a deeper, more intimate, inner lesson that teaches us something about the innate need inside of us to offer sacrifice. Simply put, the lesson is this: *In order for something to be received as a gift, it must be received twice.* What is implied here?

A gift, by definition, is something that is not deserved, but given freely. What is our first impulse when we are given a gift? Our instinctual response is, "I can't take this! I don't deserve this!" In essence, that gesture, that healthy instinctual response, is an attempt to give the gift back to its giver. But of course, the giver refuses to take the gift back and re-gives it to us with the assurance, "But I want you to have this!" When we receive it the second time, it is now more properly ours because, by trying to give it back, we healthily recognized that it was a gift, unmerited, undeserved.

That is the exact set of dynamics within the story of Abraham offering to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac comes to him as the greatest and most undeserved gift of his life, a child at nearly 100 years old! Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac parallels the instinctual refusal, "I don't desert this! I cannot accept this!" He offers the gift back to its giver. But the giver, Love itself, stops the gesture and gives the gift the second time. Now Abraham can receive Isaac, without guilt, as gift. When they are walking back home, Isaac is now Abraham's son in a way that he never was before. Abraham had to receive the gift twice by sacrificing it the first time.

That is part of the essence of sacrifice: To properly receive anything, including life itself, requires that we recognize it precisely as gift, as something undeserved. And to do that requires sacrifice, a willingness to give some or the entire gift back to its giver.

We see this as the dynamic underlying the ritual of ancient sacrifice. For example: A farmer would harvest a crop. But before he or his family would eat even a mouthful of it, he would take some of it (the 'first fruits') and offer it back to God in the form of a sacrifice, usually by burning it so that the smoke rising up to the heavens would take some of the crop back to God, whom the farmer saw as the real giver of that crop. After sacrificing some of it in this way, the farmer and his family could now enjoy the rest of it without guilt

because, by trying to give it back to its author, they made themselves more aware that it was gift. They can now enjoy it without guilt precisely because, through sacrifice, they had acknowledged it as a gift.

This understanding is behind the notion of a tithe of 10%. All 100% of what we have is a gift from God. It is God who gave us life, made it possible for us to succeed and make money. Without God, we would not have life; without God, we would have nothing. We are asked to sacrifice the first 10% to acknowledge all we have as gift.

That's the inner sense of all sacrifice, whether the sacrificing of a career for the sake of our children or Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Sacrifice recognizes gift as gift. Like Abraham, it tries to give the gift back to the giver, but the giver stops the sacrifice and gives it back in an even deeper way.

We see this same dynamic in the Eucharist: at one level, we who gather around the altar at the Eucharist and offer bread and wine to God are, in essence, both Abraham offering Isaac on an altar -- and the archetypal farmer offering back to God the first fruits of his harvest. And God, in graciousness as always, is stopping the sacrifice and giving the gifts back to us in a deeper way, even as our hearts are being changed by doing this. We give bread and wine – and receive the Body & Blood of Christ. We give our 10% tithes – and our hearts are softened and changed in the giving – they become more like the heart of Christ.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen. (last point adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, OUR ONE GREAT ACT OF FIDELITY, p. 50 -52)