

Tough Call

Romans 6:15-23 and Genesis 22:1-14

God and Father of us all... You speak hard words to us today, as you spoke so long ago to Abraham. Open our hearts to respond in faith, as Abraham did. Give us the courage to turn toward, not away from you. Give us a faith that enables us to hear and follow your tough call. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Last week, we were confronted by two very difficult scripture texts. Last week, we heard the Apostle Paul's words to us to be crucified with Christ—to share in a death like his. And from the gospel of Matthew the offensive, demanding, unreasonable words of Jesus: Whoever loves mother or father more than me is not worthy of me... whoever does not take up the cross to follow me is not worthy of me. You all listened politely—I watched you—there was not a ripple of reaction when these challenging scriptures were read. But in conversation later, I was asked, "Did Jesus really mean that?" Does God really expect us to reject our families—turn aside from our parents—disown our children—to follow Jesus? Is that the reasonable request of a reasonable God? ... Tough Call... Are we really expected to share in a death like Christ's? Take up the cross... to follow him to Calvary? Jesus was, after all, the Son of God, the Savior of the World! Does God really expect us to emulate him to that extent? Really? Tough Call...

I think it's hard for us in the United States to imagine any situation where we might be forced to choose between our families and our faith... This week we celebrate Independence Day—the day in which we remember the uniqueness of this nation, founded on right of human freedoms—the right, among other things, to freedom of faith. Can we possibly know what it is

to forego the bonds of family or friendships or even ... fidelity to the state ... in order to be faithful to Jesus? Tough Call...

These are part of what preachers call the Hard Sayings. The difficult texts we'd much rather avoid... or dance around... or soften somehow, explain away, comfort ourselves that they don't really mean what they seem to say ... We wouldn't want to frighten you away. We don't want to you feel uncomfortable. We don't want you to be confronted by an unimaginable, incomprehensible, strange and demanding God.

Man, I'm glad that was last week's lectionary! ... Whew! But this morning, I'm afraid to say, it gets worse. David has already read to us from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 6—a chapter that challenges us to rethink what freedom means at all. It's obvious that our modern concept of freedom as the inalienable human right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness are not concepts to be found in Scripture. Paul says in Romans that we are all slaves to something! We are free only within the framework of some lordship, so choose this day whom you will serve! What will enslave you?—for you will either be a slave to sin or a slave to God... and the consequences of your choice are clear: the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is life—eternal—through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

And while you hold that startling reality of your personal enslavement in your consciousness, turn with me to page 17 of the Old Testament, to Genesis 22:1-14, where we focus in on one dreadful chapter in the life of Abraham. If it's a been while since your Sunday School days, you may need to be reminded that Abraham waited over 100 years for a son, an heir, a child promised to him by God.

This son is Abraham's everything—his all in all—he is Isaac, the child of his love and his laughter. He is a vibrant, curious 12 year old, and his father adores him. Listen for God's word to us today.

After these things, God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

*And he said, "**Here I am.**"*

He 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 on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.

On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."

Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son, Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father, Abraham, "Father!"

*And he said, "**Here I am, my son.**"*

He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

*Abraham said, "**God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.**"*

So the two of them walked on together. And when they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!"

*And he said, "**Here I am.**"*

He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place, "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

So much for avoiding the Hard Sayings! This is a Tough Call. I struggle with this scripture, as I'm sure you do. I hope you do. I hope you come to church—not just to find comfort and encouragement for your faith—but also to struggle with the scripture.

This story of human sacrifice is repugnant, and we don't want to encounter this strange God who requires so much of us—this God who issues dark commands that we do not understand. There must be an easier, less demanding alternative to such a God as this, right? No, my friends, today we stand together with Abraham before the God of the Tough Call.

It's interesting to consider various interpretations of this story. Scholar Thomas Cahill proposes that perhaps this story is a dramatization of the moment in history when the forebears of the Jews gave up the practice of human sacrifice that was common in that time and place (*The Gifts of the Jews*, 83). It becomes clear that this God is very different from the ancient gods of the ancient people in the ancient world of Abraham. Polytheism was the order of the day, and the gods were portable, constrained within household statues, or tied in amulets around your neck as a good luck charm to ward off evil. But the God of Abraham distinguishes himself as a God who engages people—walks in relationship with them—talks to them, demands something of them. John Buchanan, pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, wrote, "This is a God who understands and participates in human love and passion and grief and faith. This is a living God; a God not always manageable, not always understandable, but one who can be counted on to be present and involved in human life—to be trusted with our lives and the lives of our dear ones."¹

This is a God named YHWH, the Great I Am. And when Abraham hears the call from YHWH, he responds Here I Am. Here I am, Lord. Here I am. Abraham lives into his call to be formed in the image of God.

Do we do that? I think by and large the rest of us chafe against the notion that we might be enslaved to God. We shudder against the call to leave mother or father or brother, or son to obey Jesus. We are nostalgic for freedom from the demands of the life to which Christ calls us, and we stand most often in rebellion against any notion of lordship.

In the book *Your God is Too Small*, author J.B. Phillips maintained that "the fundamental heresy of our time is the creation of a god designed to meet human hopes, expectations and intellectual capacity; a likeable, sometimes irritable but always understandable God." A god, Phillips said who is far too small: "a god who does not disturb us, who requires no more from us than lip-service, who leaves us free to enslave ourselves to whatever god of culture or our own appetites most appeals to us. Someone observed recently that this is the innocuous god of civil religion, who asks no more from us than an occasional acknowledgment by way of public invocations at civic affairs, or perhaps a nailing of the Ten Commandments to the classroom wall. A god who is in fact is no god at all, but merely our own amulet, a good luck charm to ward off evil, and—in this nation—to win elections."¹

I believe that now, especially in this year, what we need more than ever is a God who demands something of us. A God who asks that we have NO other gods before him. A God who sets us free from the tyrannies that threaten to enslave us, and a God who calls us by name, provokes us out of our complacencies, challenges us and provides vision, hope, passion and faith. A God who gives us direction and purpose. A God who gives us something to live for. A God of the Tough Call.

Eboo Patel is a man who understands this. Patel is a Muslim, the American-born son of Indian immigrants, a man who wondered at the growing number of extremists: young men and women willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of God. Patel became angry that Al Qaeda has drafted so many Muslim young people precisely by offering them a vision and passion and purpose for their lives. He wondered why peoples of faith around the world are sitting idly by while this happens.

He decided that the answer to Al Qaeda is to use their own strategy against them—to offer the world's young people an invitation to live for something more significant than themselves. So he founded the Interfaith Youth Core, an organization that calls young people of faith from around the world to come together in difficult circumstances to bring drinking water, housing, or education in self-sustaining skills for the betterment of all peoples. It's challenging and difficult and asks youth to make sacrifices, to give of themselves, to change the world. It's a tough call, and it's growing like wildfire.

I look forward to hearing in their own words the stories of our youth who returned from their mission trip Washington DC last week. I did hear from two of the chaperones who went, heard about this group of teens who stepped out of their comfort zones, left their families, slept in dorm rooms and shared a shower with 127 other kids, ate strange food and gave up their vacation time. It was a tough call, but they answered it, and found themselves embraced by children, encountering the homeless, stretching and growing and gaining new understanding that God calls us to do God's work in the world.

I am hopeful that our teens were as deeply affected as Joanne Ewald and Diana Tyrrell, who found themselves changed in such a profound way it was difficult for them to talk about it. They encountered the living, breathing, untamable, terrifying and ever-present God-with-us and they will never be the same again. They answered the Tough Call.

Like Eboo Patel, I am convinced that our young people yearn for a tough call—why, we all do—a call that reminds us of our baptism in Christ and asks us to respond as Abraham did, here I am. In the class I teach on What We believe and Why, I invite the students each term to write their statement of faith. I ask them to identify those points on which for them everything depends. I challenge them to write down what they'd be willing to die for. What they are willing to live for. Today, I extend the challenge to you. How do you respond to the Great I Am? If necessary, would you leave father and mother and brother and son to follow Jesus? Do you know yourself so clearly to be named and claimed by God in your baptism that you are willing to die to self that you can live for Christ? Take up your cross and follow Jesus? Can you say Here I Am? Will you answer the Tough Call?

¹ **The Lesson of Mt. Moriah - Matthew 10: 34-42; Genesis 22: 1-14.** John M. Buchanan. <http://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=6102>. June 28, 2008.