

Whoever

Shepherd's Grace Church

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After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>2</sup>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."

<sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. <sup>5</sup>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." <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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?" <sup>8</sup>Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

<sup>11</sup>But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>12</sup>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." <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>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."

<sup>15</sup>The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, <sup>16</sup>and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup>I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, <sup>18</sup>and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." (Gen. 22: 1-18) (Also read Matt. 10: 37-42)

Did you read the article or see the story this week of the woman who had pulled her car off to the shoulder of an interstate highway here in Kansas and was walking down the centerline of the northbound lane? She was removing turtles who had unknowingly put themselves in harm's way by wandering onto the roadway! Cars and trucks were traveling 75 M.P.H. down the road and the turtles' lives were in danger! The woman, walking down the center line was removing as many of the turtles as she could, carrying each of them to the side of the road and to safety. Cars and trucks, driving at highway speed were frantically trying to avoid the woman as she frantically moved down the highway! The driver of one of the cars which narrowly missed the woman called the Highway Patrol to alert them to the situation. Immediately a car was dispatched and when the officer caught up with the woman, approaching with caution himself so as to avoid traffic, he asked the woman what she thought she was doing. The woman replied, "I am moving these turtles to the side of the road where they will be safe." The Highway Patrol Officer looked down the road and could see another 25-30 turtles just in the short distance ahead. He said to the woman, "There is no way you are going to be able to get all these turtles to safety! What difference can you possibly make?" The woman answered, " All the difference in the world to the ones I save!"

What difference do our actions make in the lives of other people? Does anyone ever notice an act of kindness not specifically offered in our own name...in the name of our own recognition? It is great fun to enter the toll booth where there are actually human beings still working and give the booth operator a \$20 for your \$2 toll and tell her to pay for as many behind you as the change covers. The people who have been given a "free ride" drive by your car honking and waving, applauding your generosity and recognizing your "random act of kindness."

People do notice those kinds of actions and they are willing to say "thank you" for them but what difference do those acts make in the lives of the people? Some will perhaps pay the toll for others at the next booth, a few will share the story over coffee with their friends on Monday morning but most will simply say thank you and move on to lives virtually unchanged by your "random act." You feel good, to be sure, however if that were the true objective, wouldn't it have been easier to simply stand at the toll booth and pay the toll there so the people could thank you and give you the "self-gratifying pleasure" you were seeking in the first place?

I read one of those "pithy" little sayings somewhere this week and I was greatly saddened by it. The saying was, "Isn't it about time you stopped crossing oceans for others who wouldn't jump a puddle for you?" I was saddened because as I studied the scripture for this week it seemed exactly opposite what the Word of God is trying to say to us! In the few short verses I shared with you from Matthew's gospel

this morning, Jesus used the word “Whoever” 10 times. He used this word as a positive sense of encouragement and as a word of warning. 10 times He used it in an attempt to convey to those who chose Him that they would be challenged. The last time He used it, He wanted to demonstrate their greatest challenge!

Whoever would give a cup of water to one of these “little ones” in the name of a disciple; truly I tell you one of these will never lose their reward. The challenge to the disciples is not in what they hear but in what they fail to hear. Acts of kindness are to be shared not so that others can perceive our righteousness but so that Another can be made known! Our acts of kindness are not so we can be recognized but so that the One who sent us can be recognized! “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” Jesus says. “Whoever welcomes me welcomes the One who sent me!” When we give, instead of receiving recognition, we are to give recognition to the disciple who taught us for in recognizing that one, we recognize the one who taught him and in recognizing that one, we recognize the One who sent Him!

We miss the part of the teaching moment today where Jesus tells us to give in the name of another so that the other might be exalted! His teaching, after speaking to *Whoever* 9 times is to remind *Whoever* that the disciple can never be greater than the teacher! *Whoever* is willing to listen is intended to learn that it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher. *Whoever* learns this lesson will never lose their reward. Their likeness to the teacher will allow them to find the life they have been seeking, a life of fullness which recognizes that their life is only important in so far as it reflects the life of the one who has given them life!

In this case, the teacher loved the world so much that He gave His only son! When Jesus teaches disciples that *Whoever* loves a father or mother or son or daughter more than Him is not worthy of Him it is because He knows that our heavenly Father has not placed even Him above those who would put Him below their families. Jesus is not saying that disciples should not love their families or that they should choose to abandon them. He is saying that disciples have the responsibility to teach their families as He has taught them. Disciples should be teaching father and mother, son and daughter that there is nothing more important in life than the One who gives life! Disciples should be teaching their families that sacrifice for the One who gives life is not too great a sacrifice!

Disciples should be teaching that random acts of kindness ; curing the sick, providing shelter for the poor, teaching the oppressed about the One who will give them freedom should never be claimed for personal glory but the glory, the power, the honor should always be given to the One who gives the

freedom! In a few days our nation will celebrate its birth. Once again, we will pause from the performance of our busy lives to celebrate the freedoms we enjoy. Some will take time to remember those who fought and died for those freedoms. Some will go so far as to speak of those who suffered so that we might enjoy the full measure of our freedoms. Most will gather with their families and simply party through the weekend, thankful for the day off but without really giving thought to what the day means or about what the day cost!

For those of us who pause, let us be sure to give praise in the right place. Let us remember that the ones who fought and died did not give us our freedoms. The disciple can never be greater than the teacher; the servant never greater than the master. Those who fought protected and defended our freedoms but the Master is the one to whom we owe thanks! The one who welcomed the words of the prophet deserve the reward of a prophet. Those who fought and died deserve to be honored in life as people willing to give even the "last full measure of their devotion!" They do not deserve the credit for giving the freedoms. That credit, they know, belongs to the Master; the one who sent them!

The one who gives a drink to the "little ones" in the name of Another does not seek credit for the act of kindness. Ones such as these have already been taught that the water is not theirs but belongs to Another and they are willing to give it to *Whoever* so the Other can be made known! They are not surprised when the invitation to sacrifice comes. They have been taught by others that there is a purpose greater than them. They have seen in the example of father or mother that they are not the greatest and that they do not have control over their lives. Long ago they surrendered their lives for the sake of the One who gave them life!

The example that makes the point this morning is the example of our friend and the father of our faith, Abraham. After 10 chapters of Abraham's testing God, trying to control situations, manipulating circumstances so that he could gain the greatest advantage, Abraham has learned faith. He has learned obedience. He has learned that God is worthy of his trust because God keeps God's promises.

It is this man who responds when God puts him to the test. We know this is a test because the scripture tells us so. As a result, the careful hearer of the passage will recognize that neither Abraham or Isaac, his son, are in any real physical danger. What is being tested is not the life of Abraham but the love of Abraham. Is Abraham worthy of the Lord? Does Abraham love God even more than a son or daughter? Does Abraham love God even more than a wife? Is Abraham worthy of the promise God has given? These are the things God knows about Abraham! These are the things God needs Abraham to know about himself! These are the things God needs Isaac to know about both God and Abraham!

God calls and Abraham says, "Here I Am!" Earlier in service as preparation for prayer we sang, *Here I Am Lord* and one of the lines in the song is "is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night." Abraham heard. I wonder if we hear. When God speaks to God's people today is God's voice drowned out by all the hustle and bustle of our busy lives? One of the lessons Abraham teaches us today is that he has created a situation where he can hear when God calls. What situations do you create so you can hear when God calls? Do you set aside a time and place on a frequent basis where the Lord can call and you can hear? Do you set aside a time and place on a frequent basis where you can answer when God calls?

"Here I am," Abraham says and God gives him horrible news! I want you to take your son, God says. Which one, Abraham responds. I have two. "The one whom you love," God says. "Is there a depth to a father's love?" Abraham asks. "Isaac," God finally specifies! "I want Isaac!" We know, as Abraham does that Isaac is the person of the promise! Through him, God has promised Abraham a great nation and many descendants. Abraham has waited over 100 years for the possibility of perpetuating his family and now...now after years of living into the promise of God, God wants to take the promise from him! (Remember we know it is a test. Abraham does not!) Nevertheless, Abraham does not resist!

He tells Sarah he must go and worship. We can only imagine the difficulty of that conversation. "Honey, I have been called by God to sacrifice our son, our only son, whom we love!" Sarah says, "Sure sweetheart! Whatever you need to do!" That's how it would have played out right! I'm sure if you have even been remotely involved in a relationship with a mother you can imagine that it would not have gone this way! Still, Abraham persists and then prepares for the journey.

Many theologians argue that when Abraham told Isaac they needed to go on a trip, he did not tell him where they were going or why. As I read the scripture this morning, especially in light of the lesson presented in Matthew's gospel, I do not believe that is the case. I believe Abraham, the father of our faith would have told Isaac, in faith, what was going to happen! I believe Abraham had prepared Isaac to understand that the love of God is to be placed above all else. I believe Abraham would have brought up his son to know that a life of service is sometimes a life of sacrifice...even sacrifice of the very things in the world that are most important to us! I believe Abraham would have helped his son understand that "to find one's life in this world is to lose it but to lose one's life for the sake of God's love is to find it!"

As Isaac and Abraham walked toward Mt. Moriah, and Isaac asked "Where is the sacrifice," he was asking hopefully for some sign of God's mercy. Confidently, Abraham replied that God would provide! When Abraham laid the wood on the back of his son, he was expressing that confidence. Just as Jesus

tells us that, “unless we are willing to take up our cross and follow him we are not worthy of him,” so Abraham places the wood, the cross on the back of his son, his only son! Trusting God for provision, Abraham gives responsibility for the world to his son! He is saying Isaac is now responsible for the future of God’s promise! Isaac now has the choice within him to recognize and accept the full measure of sacrifice required to follow God!

Jesus tells us this morning that each generation must take up the cross. Fathers pass the cross to sons and mothers to daughters. Each generation must decide for themselves if the demands of faith are worth the effort! These demands are not the demands of the world. These demands are not a matter of paying our bills or providing food for our families. Even people who are not people of faith have these demands! The demand of the cross is to bear the burdens we have in love! The demand of the cross is that we not seek our own glory or honor but willingly sacrifice so the Other can receive the praise. When Jesus carried the cross, he carried it so God could be glorified. We carry the cross because we can never be greater than our teacher...we can never be greater than our master! Our willingness demonstrates the depth of our love, a love that is never used for our own self aggrandizement but for the glory of the One whom we love more than all else!

Isaac takes the wood on his back and walks to the appointed place. He knows but does not resist. There is no mention in scripture of his hesitation. Trusting the one who taught him love of God above all else, he allows his father to demonstrate to God his last full measure of devotion, Isaac accepts the weight of the world as a torch passed now to his generation!

Parents pass this torch to children in every generation. I can remember when I felt it passed to me. When I was getting ready to go to college, my parents were not prepared for my leaving. My decision to go to a four year school and leave home created significant tension in our household. My parents were arguing and not getting along well with one another and they were unable to express what the problem was. On the day I was to take my things to the dorm, my dad was to accompany me. On that same day, he and mom had a big fight! Dad came to me and said, “I need to stay here and you need to go on.” In that moment, I felt the full measure of my decision to leave! I felt the weight of my family resting on my shoulders and I knew I needed to go! In that moment, the cross, the burden for the future of my world rested on my shoulders and it was frightening!

I am sure Isaac was frightened but he picked up the cross. He willingly walked toward the place that had been appointed for him and he accepted the responsibility! As his father prepared to complete that which God had requested of him, suddenly God intervened! (Remember this was a test) God announced

that Abraham had passed the test, that he had given all authority for the future of his family to his son, that he had not withheld even for a moment that which was promised to him and that he was indeed worthy of the full measure of God's grace!

God's grace saved Isaac in that moment! God's decision had been made before the test was begun but God's grace was poured out on Isaac and Abraham because of Abraham's faith and willingness to Love God above all else. Because Abraham was willing not to withhold anything from God, because of the way Abraham had taught Isaac that God is above all else, God graced the family as father to all the nations!

God has a lesson for the nations in the geography of the passage shared this morning. The sacrifice was made at Mt. Moriah. This mountain would later be purchased by one of Abraham's descendants and would become the highest point in Jerusalem, the place upon which the temple mount would be constructed. It would have overlooked the Kidron valley, a valley just a few hundred yards outside Jerusalem, a place where child sacrifice was practiced by the nations God would drive out of the land!

God's message, God's lesson was that the children, all children are sacred! There is no cause to ever sacrifice the life of one of these "little ones" to whom will soon enough befall the weight of the world! They are precious and they should never be sacrificed. Give them a cup of water and I will make it living water. Take care of them in the name of the one who taught you and tell them that the one who taught you was taught by Another!

Whoever is willing to take care of these others will secure blessings on themselves that they will never lose! When the woman was taking the turtles off the highway and saving their lives, she was doing it one at a time. Salvation comes one at a time! There may be hundreds saved on a single day such as was the case for Peter and the early apostles or has been the case for Billy Graham and others but it still takes place only one person at a time!

Our opportunity is to teach our children, whoever they be, that God comes first in our lives! Our opportunity is to demonstrate our willingness to sacrifice for them but even more to demonstrate that we are willing to sacrifice for God, to give back to God from the abundance of resources that God has given to us, not withholding even that which is most precious to us! Whoever teaches this lesson, whoever is willing to live this lesson, whoever is willing to praise and honor God in this way will never lose the reward!

What difference does it make that we share random acts of kindness? What difference does it make to the turtles which are being carried to the side of the road? It is impossible to show kindness to every person in the world just as it is impossible to save every turtle so what difference does it make? To the one who is moved to safety, to the one who is saved, whoever they are, it makes all the difference in the world! Amen!