

Hike
“Order your loves.”
Genesis 22:1-14

Heart Strings: Lessons for relationships from the Ancient Heroes #1

Rev. John H. Hice
April 19, 2009
First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Not So Fast

When was the last time you spent time to sit with a child, or anyone for that matter, and play with a string? When was it that Harry Chapin wrote his song, *Cat's in the Cradle*, 1973?

My son turned ten just the other day.
He said, "Thanks for the ball, dad, come on let's play.
Can you teach me to throw?" I said, "Not today,
I got a lot to do." He said, "That's ok."
And he walked away, but his smile never dimmed,
Said, "I'm gonna be like him, yeah.
You know I'm gonna be like him."

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
"When you coming home, dad?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then.
You know we'll have a good time then."¹

In a real way, the song is about a dad who loves his son so much from the time he's born to the time the dad has turned old and the son is grown and has children of his own. All the time the son is growing up the dad has a heap of responsibilities on his plate and he's always trying to get ahead. As much as the boy wants his dad's time, there isn't any time. But the dad always has the devotion of the son. He says, "I'm going to be just like him."

The dad keeps putting him off. Then retirement comes for the father and the tables get turned. Now that he wants the time with his son, it's the son who doesn't have any time. And the father realizes, "Yes, my boy is just like me. He turned out just like me."

Does it sound familiar? Have you seen it before? The song's not just about busy dads; and it's not just about the way the young grow up to repeat the mistakes of their parents. It's also about the way, maybe, we all end up sacrificing each other for the sake of our highest pursuits.

So, don't be too quick to condemn Abraham for hiking Isaac up the mountain. And don't think the story suggests that the God who made the heavens and the earth capriciously toys with us in cruel ways to see what we're made of.

It might help if we see the story as a lesson in listening for the true voice of God. It might help if we let it tell us how to order our lives so we won't wind up putting the ones we love on the altars of gods that kill our relationships and the things that really matter.

Sacrifices

There are a couple of important things to know about this story of Abraham and Isaac and God. First, up until this point ancient people in the Middle East believed that the gods that ruled over life demanded the sacrifice of the first born. If Abraham believed he heard God make this kind of demand, it wouldn't have been considered out of line at all. In fact, his absolute willingness to give up his Isaac for the sake of his God is half the point of the story. He's obedient.² And for half the story, it's his obedience that seems to get him into trouble.

Not so different from the world we live in that fills our plates with demands that put sports first, the school play first, schoolwork first, job first, even church first. In fact it seems like there's something that expects us to put everything first, doesn't it? Maybe it isn't a matter of any one of these commitments alone being unhealthy. Maybe the god that demands the sacrifice is the one that convinces the lot of us that we have to do it all and have it all. It seems like a paradox, but making choices and priorities seem not to be an option any more.

Maybe what's lost is our ability to make healthy boundaries in our lives and say, "Enough is enough. I'll say 'yes' to this, but 'no' to that." Maybe we're trying to be obedient to the god of *doing everything*.

Abraham thought he heard the voice; and his absolute obedience almost took him to big grief.

But the second thing important to know about this story is that Abraham's obedience to God ultimately took him to the place of redemption. This is where Abraham is unlike most of us when we get trapped by the god of doing everything, who tricks us into worshiping everything at the expense of our loves. Maybe it's a piece of wisdom from Father Abraham we need to recover. He really did put God first.

God would someday make a law out of it. In fact, it would be the first of the Ten Commandments given to Moses: "You shall have no other gods before me." Even later Jesus calls it the greatest commandment, he says, "The greatest commandment is this: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength."

When I was young and in ministry and it was already becoming evident that I could be prone to a good work addiction, aspiring to be the most accomplished pastor to come down the road since Asbury or Wesley or someone like them, my senior pastor took me aside and taught me essentially the same thing. He said, "You have a lot of responsibilities in life: your ministry, the church, your family, what you do for recreation, and your relationship with God. Any one of these could dominate, or all of them together could consume you." He said, "You have to get your priorities straight. As long as you don't put God first, everything else will be out of balance. It'll get you in trouble."

In a way, he was saying that when you're not in balance, you end up sacrificing the ones you love. You even end up doing poorly at the things you set out to do well. You even wind up sacrificing yourself.

Then he went on to say, "You have to put Christ first. It's only when God is in the driver's seat of your life that the loves and quests of your life come into balance."

His name was Monte. But it might as well have been Abraham. See, if Abraham had been anything less than devoted to God more than anything or anyone else including his son, Isaac would have been a goner.

Provision

So Abraham went through with it. He took Isaac up the mountain and carried the fire. He built up the wood and bound his son and laid him on the altar, raising his knife.

Then came the "Baa" in the bush. And God in all his grace provided all the sacrifice that was necessary. Isaac lived. Abraham's love was not lost. Then God said in effect, "You who build these altars upon which you sacrifice your loved ones: you must not do it any more." And that's the second important message of the scripture. When you put Christ first, the days of sacrificing the people you love are over.

And the cat's in the cradle, and the silver spoon, little boy blue, and the man in the moon. When you comin' home dad? I'm here right now. We're gonna have a good time, now.

References

- [1] Harry Chapin, "Cat's in the Cradle". Rhino/Electra Label. Original Release date: November 30, 1973. Current copyright 2004, Atlantic Recording Corp. Manufactured and marketed by Warner Strategic Marketing. ASIN: B00122BCMK.
- [2] Theodore Heibert, Annotations on Genesis, *New International Bible Study Bible (NRSV)*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 2003. p 43.