

2 Lent 2003
"A Father's Love"
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

Being a parent changes you in many ways. For me I think the biggest change was discovering a new kind of love, the love of a father for his son, of a parent for a child. You parents know what I'm talking about.

It's a love I had never known before George and Henry were born. This kind of love is so intense it's the greatest joy and pleasure in life. You just LOVE them so MUCH. But with that love comes a new kind of fear. The thought of anything happening to that little one just shatters your heart.

We see that kind of love in our passages this morning. As I read them this week I felt the stirring of tears - and I'm not often like that - as I put myself in Abraham's shoes with Isaac. This feeling was made all the more poignant by the death of young Will Stanley, a magnificent 22 year old at my old church in Richmond. He died in a car accident last week.

And of course with the clouds of war gathering in the Middle East just think of the hundreds of thousands of parents, in the US and Britain and in Iraq facing the very real possibility of offering their son's lives in battle. There's just great joy and cost, reward and risk in being a parent.

That's what Abraham is dealing with in our Old Testament story this morning.
His whole life revolves around young Isaac. I guess that's true of most parents, but I daresay it's MORE true of Abraham. This boy incarnates all that God has promised Abraham.

He's a true miracle child. God promised a son to Abraham years ago, even though Sarah was barren and way past childbearing age. Through this son God will make Abraham's descendants a great nation. Through him all the nations on earth will be blessed. The whole future God has promised is bound up in **this indispensable, irreplaceable child.** There is a lot riding on the life of Isaac.

And now God is asking Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice, a burnt offering. As inexplicable as it seems to us, I think Abraham knew what God was after here. Abraham knows God and **offering sacrifice was a familiar part of his relationship with God.** This is how people prayed before Jesus came and offered himself as the final blood sacrifice.

Abraham was a shepherd. God had richly blessed him with ever growing flocks and herds. In thanksgiving, Abraham regularly offered the best of his flock as a tithe. We do the same thing with our income, showing our gratitude and commitment to God by offering the first 10% of all he has blessed us with.

Abraham taught his son Isaac to do the same, as we should teach our kids. This is

beautifully portrayed in the movie Abraham, which I'll have playing in the parish hall after church. Old Abraham, played by Richard Harris, teaches little Isaac, who was 6 or 7 years old, about choosing an animal to offer.

"Take a lamb you love and offer it to God as a sign of your faith," Abraham says. "The one I love...the *most*?" asks Isaac. You can see the pained realization on his face. Isaac has a favorite lamb that he carries everywhere in his arms.

And now God asks Abraham to do the same thing, to "not withhold your son, your only son, from me." And that's exactly what Abraham, trusting God, trudged out to Mt Moriah with a heavy heart to do. Everyone asks, why would God ask Abraham to do this?

I think God wanted to teach two truths to Abraham and to all of us who come after him. **The first truth is that God sacrifices, too.** God has a Son, like Isaac, his beloved, only-begotten Son. He is well pleased with him. God knows the great joy and pain of being a Father, for he will sacrifice his Son *just as he asked Abraham to do*. God is THERE with Abraham. God says, my Son died, too.

Paul tells us about it in his letter to the church in Rome this morning. He describes God in almost the exact same terms God described Abraham. **"He did not withhold his only Son**, but gave him up for all of us."

The symmetry between them is so clear. Abraham sacrificed his son to show that he loves God more than anything else. God sacrificed his Son to show that he loves US more than any thing else. God doesn't just love with words. He loves with actions.

"God demonstrates his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." You are loved THIS much. And the liturgy every week commemorates and demonstrates the sacrifice God made in giving us his Son. Just listen to the language of sacrifice in our Eucharistic prayer this morning.

That brings us to the second truth God wants us to learn. **We must sacrifice, too.** God has made the ultimate sacrifice for us, and we must respond in kind.

Jesus tells us about it in our Gospel lesson this morning. He has accepted the impending reality of his death and now begins to prepare the disciples for it. The time of agony is coming when the Father will sacrifice his only Son and the Son will offer himself on the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Just picture Abraham and Isaac on Mt Moriah.

But when Peter hears this he vigorously objects. He won't hear of sacrifice and suffering and death. For him, Messiah's coming is a matter of triumph and glory. He rebukes Jesus for his pessimistic thoughts. Get yourself together, man! You won't win anyone with THAT message!

Well Peter's done it again: open mouth and insert foot. Jesus counter-rebukes Peter for completely missing the point. Jesus says, If you want to be WITH me, you've got to be LIKE me. You must take up your cross and follow the bloody footsteps of Jesus, offering your life and all that you have and are to God.

We must sacrifice all that is most precious to us. We must love God more than we love anything else. It was true in Abraham's time and it's true in ours. Offering sacrifice is an essential part of our relationship with God. And we do it every week in the offertory of the Liturgy. When those plates come around you put your lives in there. Step into the plate. We offer it on the altar as a sacrifice. Just count the number of times "sacrifice" is mentioned in the liturgy.

The key point to remember here is that **it's only when we offer our lives to God that we receive the life God offers us in Christ.** Let me repeat that. It's only when we offer our lives to God that we receive the life God offers us in Christ.

That, my friends, is a paradox. When you try to keep and clutch something to yourself, you lose it. When you release it, offer it to God, sacrifice it, you get it back with so much more. As Jesus said, "those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

The paradox is illustrated in each of our lessons. Abraham gave his son, but ended up walking back down the mountain with him. In the process he assured the future of the people of God. God gave his Son, but got him back from the dead on the third day. In the process he gained all of us as sons and daughters.

In the same way, Jesus calls us, in the words of Eucharist Rite I, to "offer our selves, our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto Thee." In the process we gain our life eternally. Paul asks us, If God gave us his SON, his most dear and precious heart, won't he give us EVERYTHING ELSE as well? **That's what we gain.** If God is for us WHO can be against us?

Abraham in our Old Testament lesson understands this. He knows that God knows best and he can trust God. "God will provide the sacrifice." So up the mountain he goes with Isaac.

Peter on the other hand doesn't get it – yet. He's very much a work in progress as are we. Jesus is committed to Peter's growth and ours. "Consider how Jesus took a simple fisherman – with a size 13 foot in his mouth - taught him, mentored him, rebuked him, prayed for him, commissioned him and filled him with his Holy Spirit."

In other words **Jesus is determined to get it into his thick skull, and ours.** Following Jesus, serving God, Building Christians for Service means learning to die and live, to offer our all to God just as he offers his all to us in Jesus. He wants us to grasp the Father's love. AMEN