

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
July 2, 2017
The Rev. Jamie S. Samilio

The One Percent

The Collect today reminded me of a story, about woman who was not a church-goer, and had little religious background or education, who took a job as a parish administrator. Her first task was making a new pew card. The details were in place, and the rector dictated the quote he wanted on the front of the card, and off it went to the printer. It pays to proofread. The card read, “The church is based on the apostles and the profits!” P R O F I T S!

Take heart, this is NOT a Stewardship sermon. In some ways, it may be easier if it were, because in today’s scripture that I chose, Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac. Not a text preachers look forward to sorting out. Yesterday, our lector for today said, “I wonder what Isaac's side of the story would be. Could you imagine? "Dad, WTF!"

My ah-ha moment in preparing this sermon was realizing that change comes to us over time, and social changes are necessary if we are to advance as a Christian community, and as the human race.

Today, we read of how God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and in a commentary* by Kathryn Schifferdecker, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, she recalled a Yiddish folk tale that goes something like this: Why did God not send an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Because God knew that no angel would take on such a task. Instead, the angels said, "If you want to command death, do it yourself." The Angels are questioning their creator – how bold of them. Would you ever question what God is asking you to do? I know I do it all the time. There has been a lot of heated debate over this story for centuries. Is it a story of an abusive God, a misguided Abraham, and religious violence at its worst? Or is it a story of faith and obedience?

Many scholars argue that it is simply a tale demonstrating the shift from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice. This seems likely, as other biblical texts expressly forbid child sacrifice** —children were not valued until they survived and were able to contribute to the sustainability of the household. Mortality rates were high and resources scarce. The practice of human sacrifice was known in the cultures surrounding Israel and may have been practiced in Israel as well, hence the need for prophetic condemnation of it. The sacrifice of the ram in place of Isaac, becomes the foundational act for all the Temple sacrifices that follow. This story helped change what people did to worship and honor God.

For Christianity, the sacrifice of the beloved son has an obvious connection with Jesus’ death. The willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son became for early Christians one of the greatest examples of his faith: “By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac ... He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead.” It is understood as a story of faith against all odds, and as a foreshadowing of God’s self-giving in Jesus Christ.

What I took from this was the idea that human cultural development does not happen overnight, and sometimes, a single act of faith can change the course of human events. What we do, how we act in the world, matters.

The second thing that struck me as important about today’s scriptures was that the act of providing a cool drink to the thirsty is not just a job for the clergy. It is not a job that was done only by those in the

scriptures and pages of church history. The Gospel says, “Whoever welcomes” and “Whoever gives,” and that means all of us.

We moved from being people who offered human sacrifice, to animal sacrifice, to finally understanding that God does not delight in burnt offerings at all. We are called to love God with all our heart, and to love our neighbors as ourselves—this is much more important than sacrificing burnt offerings.

Today’s Gospel tells us to show hospitality even to the least among us—children. Think about that for a moment. Today, our children are our future, loved, protected. We have come a long way, but we are not finished yet. Where we go next in our social and spiritual evolution is up to us. It is not up to “THEM,” whoever they are. It is not up to the clergy alone, it is up to all of us: you, the clergy, and every person we are in community with. That means we had better be in community and build relationships with everyone—no exceptions.

We may have stopped sacrificing people and animals as part of our worship, but have we become less self-serving? Do we keep the “other” in mind when we act in the world? Do we look out for number one, first and foremost? It is a challenge to balance self-care, self-interests, and Jesus’ command to us to love and welcome each other.

You have heard of the seven degrees of separation—the Kevin Bacon theory? The idea is that there are only 7 relationships that separate people from each other. If each of us joined together, we would connect to the whole world. Seem impossible? Do you think we will ever get to the place we see the human race having evolved like in Star Trek? That world has respect and support for everyone, and they recognize that all gifts are good gifts that can be used to unite the world—it is global thinking. And together we can get there.

Should we strive for a better life—invent, create, heal, feed, clothe, and develop ways to increase productivity? Yes, I think so, and I think people should be rewarded for their work. The Gospel says, we will be rewarded. Then, in gratitude for our abundance, we need to give to the other, welcome, feed, clothe and offer cold water to the stranger—especially the most vulnerable. Share your abundance so that all thrive, because that is following Jesus’s command. The Gospel says, “...whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” We are the “whoever,” we will receive our reward.

How do we continue to evolve into a better Christian community and a better human race? Sometimes it takes a revolution for us to evolve. Sometimes we need to act on behalf of the “other” even if it makes us uncomfortable, or makes us vulnerable. Doing the right thing is not always easy or safe, but sometimes we need to march, protest, or speak up in the moment when someone is being bullied.

Most change happens over time. Try to be...one percent better today than you were yesterday. Does one percent seem like too little an effort? One percent at a time—I learned this lesson when I first started taking martial arts. I could not imagine kicking my foot above my head, or breaking more than one board at a time. One day I was trying to kick higher than ever, and losing my balance. My instructor said to me, “It is important to maintain your balance and try to improve only one percent each day. So the next time you come in, do not set your goal to kick over your head, set your goal to kick one percent higher than you did today.” In the next month, I was able to achieve more than I had in the prior six months, and his advice to maintain balance and try one percent harder every day, has served me well in just about every aspect of my life.

Take a deep breath. We have only this breathe on which to live. We cannot survive on a breath we took yesterday, nor on a breath we will take tomorrow. We have only this moment, this breath. I wish a revolution would come to me in my next breath that turns me from being self-serving to completely God-serving in an instant. If in my next breath that does not happen, I think I will try to be at least one percent better, and make a choice for the “other,” that is one percent better than I was yesterday, or even one percent better then I was when I took my previous breath. This is the path of evolution my soul takes every day. In 100 days however, I will not reach perfection, because I am human. For every one percent I move forward, my other actions move me back, sometimes 20, 50, or even 70 percent, knocking me backward and off balance. We can have revolutionary idea, and we can, in extreme circumstances, change overnight. But, most of the time, this is not the case. We cannot just say, “In the morning I will wake up ten pounds thinner.” We have to work for that, one percent at a time—and even so, you bet there will be backsliding. Faith and grace pick me up, dust me off, and push me forward again.

I need to pray, I need to keep moving forward, I think we all need to that, as the consequences of backsliding are immense. A song I love reminds me how to pray to stay balanced and moving forward. “Day by day, O dear Lord, three things I pray: To see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly day by day.” AMEN.

* https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3279

** (e.g. Leviticus 18:21; Jeremiah 7:30-34; Ezekiel 20:31).