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Proper 8, Year A, Matthew 10:40-42; Romans 6:12-23; Genesis 22:1-14
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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

Introduction

- Is an action right because God *commands* it, or does God command it because it is *right*?
 - This is the question posed by today's reading from Genesis, and it follows on what we discussed last week as those actions—those “pesky behavioral expectations”—that come along with being a follower of Jesus.
- Today, we see more of these behavioral expectations
 - Giving a cup of water to a thirsty person, that is, not turning away from the hungry and the poor in their need
 - And Paul's urging us to understand that we are faced with a choice:
 - We can be either slaves to sin or slaves to God
 - Being a slave to sin is death and being a slave to God is true freedom
- But today I want us to jump backward (or outward) in the story, to what I called the third concentric circle or the third nested narrative – that is, to the call of Abraham and the founding of Israel as a people
 - Today's well-known story is called the sacrifice or the binding of Isaac and it is one of the most provocative stories in the Bible
 - It raises for us the question I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, and it is both an ethical question and also a deeply theological and philosophical question:
 - Is an action right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right?
 - This question arises because God seems to command Abraham to *kill* his only son as a *test* of his obedience to God
 - As we know, killing, unless it is done in self-defense or as part of a judicial action is always considered wrong and against God's own law in the Ten Commandments, so does it make it such an action right if God commands it?

- And lest we think this question has no relevance, we need only think of the Christian crusaders who murdered in the name of God, or ISIS jihadists who currently murder in the name of God

Background

- The story of the binding of Isaac is extremely important in all the three Abrahamic traditions
 - For Jews, it serves as example of self-sacrificial obedience to God’s will (self-sacrificial because some in the tradition hold that Isaac was an adult at the time and could have escaped his father) and as a symbol of a readiness for martyrdom for the sake of one’s faith as a Jew
 - For Christians, it has traditionally been viewed as a “type” of Christ; that is, it becomes a way of understanding the death of Jesus in obedience to God as his Father
 - For Muslims, it serves a similar role that it does for Jews, though they believe it was Ishmael rather than Isaac who was offered
- In preparation for this sermon, I researched some rabbinical understandings of this important story—I won’t list them all (there are many!), and as we might guess, many of them disagreed with one another!
 - Most argued that story is just what it claims to be—a test of faith—but some also acknowledged that this doesn’t get us around the ethical and theological question I raised
 - Some argued that God never intended Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and that Abraham understood this from the start
 - Instead, God was using this case as a way to teaching humans that human sacrifice and, in particular, child sacrifice was never acceptable to God—child sacrifice was a common practice in the ancient middle east
 - Others argued that it was not that God was testing Abraham, but that Abraham was testing God!
 - For people in the ancient middle east, it is said to be more surprising that God stopped the sacrificed than accepted it
 - God, then, proved his goodness by staying the hand of Abraham
 - But any way we understand it, it seems we can’t get away from the ethical and theological ambiguity of the command

- So, we are back to my original question: Is an action right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right?

Long history behind this question...

- There is a long history behind this question that I don't have time to go into today
- In general, Protestants have favored the first view—an action is right because God commands it—and Catholics have favored the second—God commands an action because it is right
- What's at stake in the question?
 - If it is God's command that makes an action right, God's sovereignty is protected—God can command anything, and by definition it is right—but this comes at the cost of making God seem arbitrary or even evil—moreover, God doesn't follow God's own rules
 - However, if God commands that which is right, God is protected from being arbitrary, but then it seems to subject God to ethical principles that are "higher" than God, thus undermining God's sovereignty
- A possible way out of this might be to suggest that a good God set up the basic ethical rules of the universe at its creation, such as it is never permissible to kill innocent human beings, and then God freely decided to follow God's own rules
 - This doesn't get us around all the other, related problems we might imagine—like why a good God allows the deaths of so many innocents to sickness or injury
 - It also doesn't help us answer the basic question posed in this story if we believe God really tested Abraham's faith and obedience by commanding him to murder his own son

Conclusion

- At the end of the day, I don't have a ready answer for us to this problem
 - God's goodness is a bedrock belief of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions
 - And however we answer the question I posed for us today, we should not let go of our belief in God's goodness—*all* is lost to us if God is not truly good

- I tend to see this passage in evolutionary terms—that those who passed down these stories to us were revealing their own unfolding understanding who God is and what God expects
- God expects obedience and trust, and, yes, there are tragic times—mercifully, few—when we must choose between God and other things that we love, such as in cases of martyrdom
 - And we pray each Sunday to be delivered from evil, which in Luke’s version is, keep us from the time of trial—a time when we must choose between God and martyrdom
 - And, our faith will be tested, but I tend to believe it is the struggles of normal human life that test us the most, rather than God’s actively testing us as individuals
 - In this sense, then, all of life becomes grist for God’s mill to help us grow in love, trust, and obedience—it isn’t always easy, but it is perhaps the principal challenge of our faith
 - Amen